*The Aboriginal Memorial* 1987–88
by Ramingining Artists, Central Arnhem Land
wood, natural pigments; maximum heights 327.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia
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# Life and art?

## Relocating Aboriginal art and culture in the museum

**by Angela Philp**


## Abstract

Using the National Museum of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia as case studies, this article tracks the shifts in the relationships of these museums with Aboriginal art, culture and histories. The concept of Indigeneity has, over time, become an important marker of Australian cultural identity, distinguishing specifically Australian characteristics and traditions from those of other nations. It has enabled some museums, particularly the National Museum, to open up debate on the moral and ethical issues arising from Indigenous histories and cultures. Yet in this arena it could be said that the art museum led the way; its celebration of Aboriginal art has played a part in fostering the economic independence of some Indigenous communities, and has been a source of substantial self-esteem and pride in communities long denied a valued place in Australian society. Alternatively, however, the aesthetic framework of the art museum could be seen to diminish the political message of much Aboriginal art. This paper explores the tensions between aesthetics, history and politics that have been critical in the institutional histories of the National Museum and the National Gallery.

## Introduction

As you would expect, the National Gallery of Australia and the National Museum of Australia both hold extensive collections of Australian Aboriginal art and material culture.[1] Both young institutions (the National Gallery opened in 1982 and the National Museum in 2001), they reflect contemporary attitudes and reveal a new value and respect for the culture of the first Australians. Yet this respect was not always so, and it is not universal. Tracking the shifts in the relationships of these museums with Aboriginal art, culture and histories reveals a number of critical tensions, particularly in Australia's sense of its own cultural identity.

The concept of Indigeneity has, over time, become an important marker of Australian cultural identity, distinguishing specifically Australian characteristics and traditions from those of other nations. It has enabled some museums, particularly the National Museum, to open up debate on the moral and ethical issues arising from Indigenous histories and cultures. Yet in this arena it could be said that the art museum led the way; its celebration of Aboriginal art has played a part in fostering the economic independence of some Indigenous communities, and has been a source of substantial self-esteem and pride in communities long denied a valued place in Australian society. Alternatively, however, the aesthetic framework of the art museum could be seen to diminish the political message of much Aboriginal art. Tensions between aesthetics, history and politics have been critical in the institutional histories of the National Museum and the National Gallery. It is these tensions that I wish to explore.

The National Museum collection includes about 15,000 ethnographic artifacts, 80,000 stone tools and about 1600 bark paintings from all over Australia as well as a large selection of contemporary Aboriginal art in new media. The National Gallery similarly holds a very large collection of Aboriginal works in a variety of media, including bark paintings, contemporary acrylics on canvas, ceramics, fibre art, sculpture, photography and prints. Both institutions have permanent displays of Aboriginal art and material culture — but there the similarity ends.

The National Gallery of Australia displays Aboriginal art prominently, with minimal amounts of information on the artist(s), styles and meanings of the works on wall text, supplemented by catalogues, computer kiosks and the Gallery website. The display is essentially organised in the context of a chronological and sometimes thematic art history, with the emphasis on the visitor's ability to engage with the aesthetic qualities of the work. Special exhibitions regularly focus on individuals or groups of artists, or on thematic concerns in the art. The displays maintain the purity of the art museum space, with few distractions to detract from the works of art.

The National Museum incorporates Aboriginal art in the context of both pre-contact history and the history of contact with settler society. The National Museum's First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People uses a multidisciplinary approach to describe the diverse cultures and 60,000-year histories of Australia's Indigenous peoples, including attachments to land and sea. The history of contact — violent and non-violent — includes mission life, the forced removal of children (the 'stolen generations'), the fight for civil rights and land rights (native title), and the movement towards reconciliation with the settler nation. Likewise, the shifts in government policies from isolation of Indigenous people, through assimilation and latterly recognition of a plural society

are charted by giving art, material culture, interactive displays, documentary material and Indigenous peoples' own voices equal weight — each in dialogue with the others.

## Valuing Aboriginal art

Up to the 1960s in Australia, Aboriginal material culture was almost exclusively the preserve of museums of natural history. It was believed in the art world, particularly by art historians, critics and curators, that Aboriginal people did not have a tradition of art, only a decorative tradition. Similarly, anthropologists working in museums had tended to reject the term 'art' because, as anthropologist Howard Morphy has suggested, the term was believed to impose a western categorisation on Aboriginal culture, one that deprived it of a fuller understanding and interpretation.[2] So it is perhaps surprising that the National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry, in their draft report of 1965, which included more detailed and revealing comment than the slimmer final report, declared that 'Aboriginal people are part of the nation and their traditional art, in any case so much more distinctive and redolent of the physical environment than that of the new-comers, should be in a National Gallery'.[3]

The report declared that 'it goes without saying that the art of latter day aborigines has a right to be seen as indistinguishable from that of the rest of the population'.[4] The report qualified this inclusiveness by adding that:

> aboriginal art is the material of anthropological, archaeological, and ethnic studies and that collections have been formed and may be appropriately displayed for some of these purposes elsewhere in Canberra. The treatment of it given by the Gallery therefore may be less extensive and more selective than would otherwise be necessary.[5]

The reference 'elsewhere in Canberra' was to the National Ethnographic Collection, then stored in the Institute of Anatomy, and the possibility of a future National Museum. By implication, the responsibilities of the National Gallery in relation to Aboriginal art would remain subsidiary to these primary collectors.

This, perhaps hesitant, recognition clearly came from a sense of the importance of Indigenous cultures for Australia (and this was only two years before the symbolically significant 1967 referendum[6]), although the equivocation suggests it was still difficult to see Aboriginal art as being the cultural equivalent of western forms of art. Indeed, the committee expected that museums of Aboriginal and archaeological materials, along with industrial design, a technological museum, and professional art training services (that is, an art school), would have provision made for them in the further development of Canberra, and thus the National Gallery should not seek to duplicate these. So why was Aboriginal art suddenly singled out for special consideration?

It has been well documented that a few state galleries had held a handful of exhibitions of Aboriginal art from the late 1950s. Collecting by art museums up until the mid-1950s was limited. Although the Art Gallery of South Australia had purchased one Aboriginal bark in 1939 (reportedly the first such purchase by an Australian state gallery), the major acquisitions were those distributed by the Commonwealth in 1956 to all major Australian state art galleries and museums. These were the nearly 500 bark paintings collected by anthropologist Charles Mountford when he led the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948, as well as his subsequent visits to Yirrkala in 1951 and Melville Island in

1953. While the director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Robert Campbell, made an early commitment and recommended that his gallery establish a collection of Aboriginal art in 1955 (receiving two gifts from Mountford in the same year), often these donations languished in storage for years. One of the first significant exhibitions was in 1957, when the Art Gallery of Western Australia hosted the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art: Arnhem Land Paintings on Bark and Carved Human Forms*.[7] Curated by Ronald and Catherine Berndt (anthropologists, not art historians), it named, for the first time, individual artists, and identified regional styles.

Unusually, for a state art museum, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, under the guidance of deputy director Tony Tuckson and with the help of American collector Dr Stuart Scougall, had been purposely collecting Aboriginal art since the late 1950s. Tuckson and Scougall had made expeditions to Arnhem Land and the Northern Territory coast in 1958 and 1959 with the express intention of collecting Aboriginal art. The trips were funded by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and some of the art collected went into the gallery's collection, while other works were donated later by Scougall. Tuckson was instrumental in encouraging the first serious acceptance of Aboriginal art in Australian art museums. For years, however, the collection of Aboriginal art remained in an out of the way basement gallery. Tuckson did, however, organise an exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Art*, a broad survey that toured Australian state galleries in 1960–61. Exhibitions of this kind were exceptional rather than common events, although they did reveal an abundance of material waiting for fresh interpretation and understanding. Certainly they served as indicators of a more ancient Australia, signifying a history other than the Eurocentric art tradition derived from a colonial past. Nevertheless, their main effect was as gestures towards the assimilation of Aboriginal art into western art traditions. At the time, Aboriginal art was not generally considered by the art world to be equal to the achievements of western art — it needed the context of the western art museum to give it aesthetic legitimacy.

At a 1962 seminar on the architecture of galleries and museums of art held at the Australian National University, the director of the National Gallery of Victoria, Eric Westbrook, declared that one of 'the requirements of the galleries in the National Capital is a Gallery of Australian Aboriginal Art, regarded as Art and not as Anthropology'.[8] Westbrook qualified this need for a Gallery of Australian Aboriginal Art by saying that 'visitors to the Capital, particularly overseas visitors, would like to see this sort of display, if only to be able to correct the impressions they could form of Aboriginal art from the ash trays and other "typical Australian souvenirs"'.[9] Aboriginal images and motifs were popularly used from the 1930s by graphic artists such as Gert Sellheim and Douglas Annand, and often employed to market Australia as a travel destination. They were especially prominent around the time of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. This was a form of appropriation that usually involved placing Aboriginal motifs in a modernist design, and ignoring (or ignorant of) the cultural meanings and traditional uses of Aboriginal art. At the time, the art world in Australia rejected most of these practices as part of what it considered 'low', rather than 'high', art.

Westbrook's motive, however, in not collecting Aboriginal art for the National Gallery of Victoria was his belief that it belonged in the museum, not the gallery — that is, it was anthropology, not art. Why his views altered for the national capital is

perhaps due to Canberra's role as a symbol of the nation. While Aboriginal art was not considered appropriate for his own institution, his comments suggest that he recognised that it had a place in national consciousness, and therefore deserved a place in national institutions.

Westbrook's reference to a Gallery of Australian Aboriginal Art seems quite dismissive — a facility needed to cater for tourists and to 'correct' the impressions left by what were obviously considered to be inauthentic souvenirs. On the other hand, it suggests that the Australian art world was beginning to consider Aboriginal art outside the context of anthropology and to accept its place in the world of art on the basis of aesthetic and cultural merit. Aboriginal art and culture were starting to be recognised as unique and to be considered emblematic of the nation. This idea was not entirely new in the art world, as the work of artist Margaret Preston, art teacher Frances Derham and others suggests.[10] But it was certainly a new attitude in Australian art galleries.

It is often argued that genuine interest in Indigenous art did not enter the world of Australian public galleries until about the early 1980s and still took years after that to be fully accepted. Yet art historian Ian McLean, noting Margaret Preston's interest through the 1920s and 1930s in finding 'in Aboriginal art the source for a distinctive Australian identity', suggests that in an 'alliance between art, anthropology, modernism and nationalism, Aboriginal art became the foundation and inspiration of a modern, national Australian art'.[11] McLean asserts that the upsurge of nationalism produced by the 1940s wartime experience created a new independence from Britain, and that nativism was transformed 'into a distinctly anti-imperial Indigenous consciousness'.[12] In fact, he went on to say that historian Russel Ward's 1958 description of an 'outback ethos' and a 'nomad tribe' of bushmen 'incorporated Aboriginality into the new national mythos, and so provided the opportunity for an appreciation of Aboriginal art and culture'.[13] Ward in fact was criticised for underestimating the role of Indigenous people in Australia, although it should be noted that his book, *The Australian Legend,* was not intended as a history of Australia, but rather as an exploration of the development of a bush mythology, one which certainly entertained the possibility of incorporating white myths about Aboriginality.[14]

Aboriginal art, or at least a popularised version of it, exemplified diversely in numerous prints of Albert Namatjira's paintings and Aboriginal motifs by white designers on articles of domestic craft such as platters and teacups, was extremely fashionable in the 1950s and 1960s. There seemed to be a wide gap between the popular imagination and the judgements of the art world. For instance, the 1940s and 1950s had brought celebrity status to Namatjira, who represented the 'success' of assimilation policies. However, there was little understanding of his deep relationship with the country he painted. Apart from Namatjira, the public's only real acquaintance with Aboriginal art was limited to work produced largely for the souvenir market. Certainly there was no education about meaning or symbolism or the relation of Aboriginal art either to tradition or to contemporary experience. The art world meanwhile condemned Namatjira's painting, considering it derivative and inauthentic, neither European nor Aboriginal, and dismissing it as merely clever copying of an already outdated European landscape style.[15]

To be authentic, Indigenous art clearly had to be traditional, and preferably from pre-European contact. It was considered inferior to western art traditions. Widespread

ignorance of the complexity of Aboriginal art and its close relationship with land was combined with a lack of understanding of the ceremonial and ephemeral character of some Indigenous artistic practices. Yet Aboriginal art *was* beginning to be seen by white society as a distinctive indicator of Australian-ness, marking the nation as independent and unique.[16] This process of change related to the developing activism of Aboriginal people from the early 1960s onwards. The struggle for recognition and the assertion of Aboriginal rights led to an increasing awareness of instances of exploitation and misunderstanding.[17] Educational and cultural institutions in particular were gradually becoming aware of the need to address their own policies and practices in relation to Indigenous experience.[18]

## Incorporating Aboriginal art in the National Gallery of Australia

By 1971, when the final design for the National Gallery was approved, Australia still followed a policy of assimilation of Indigenous people. The belief that so-called 'primitive' art represented a past stage of human development persisted, and the National Gallery initially fell into line with this thinking. But the National Gallery aspired to be modern; and this meant overcoming old differences between ethnicity, tribes and clans. The state and its cultural institutions were the new structures that unified, assimilated and covered over regional, cultural and social differences.

In the same year, the journal *Art and Australia* published an article on what the author called the 'National Collection of Primitive Art',[19] which at the time was under the aegis of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board. At the time, the Advisory Board considered the collection would become the responsibility of a future National Museum; but this particular article had the planning of the National Gallery in mind. The author, arts writer Graeme Petty, noting that 'Australia's chief collections of primitive art are those in the various State natural history museums', outlined the case for its potential future inclusion in the National Gallery in terms that were typical for the time:

> The historical reason for this circumstance is that Art used to be considered the privilege of civilised man, while the imaginative exercises of his less advanced fellows were held as more properly the responsibility of those curious about man's pre-civilised and primitive antecedents.

Aboriginal material culture, he seemed to be admitting, could now be included in the western category 'art'. Petty's reference to 'imaginative exercises' clearly distinguishes between an unrefined, simple or 'natural' art and that of more complex, sophisticated cultures. He reinforced this by saying that:

> Artists themselves were in fact largely responsible for bringing primitive art to the attention of the critical public. They not only drew inspiration from it but enthused about it and bought it. Even today artists feature second only to galleries as buyers of primitive art.[20]

'Artists' is a reference to western modernist artists, those inspired stylistically by 'primitive' art, in the tradition of Picasso, Braque, Epstein and others. He went on to declare 'primitive' art as less a 'personal statement of the artist' than a 'functional art of sacred and memorial work, or the giving of decorative finish to mundane objects of everyday life'.[21] Petty suggested it was surprising that there should be any move to include 'primitive' art in the future National Gallery. Nevertheless, his comments indicate

that the issue was up for discussion and that the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board's intentions for the National Ethnographic Collection were by no means cut and dried.

Modern western art had appropriated 'primitive' art since the early twentieth century. Modernist art history used the term 'primitivism' in a romantic sense, that is, as part of a fond reflection on the past, a past that western culture has progressed beyond, in becoming more and more modern, yet one that needed to be 'rediscovered' to reinvest art with naive honesty and pure form.[22] In 1938 American art critic Robert Goldwater used the term 'primitivistic' in association with modern art, to mean fresh, spontaneous, childlike, underdeveloped, sometimes wild and savage. Unlike the anthropologist Franz Boas, who as early as 1900 had challenged racial theories on the so-called realistic inadequacies of Inuit and African art,[23] Goldwater viewed 'primitive art' as 'other': as an earlier stage of human evolution. He noted the appropriation of 'primitive' art, especially from Africa and the Pacific, by artists like Picasso, Matisse and Gauguin, as a means to access the subconscious, raw emotion, and a somewhat 'purer' sense of form and identity, apparently stripped of the civilising layers of western European society.[24] For Goldwater, primitivism was as much an intellectual exercise in the arts as an aesthetic one — it was about seeking a truth, an essence, a sense of the timeless and universal.[25] These, of course, were notions applied to 'primitive' art by Europeans and Americans with little real knowledge of the cultural and social belief systems in which they were made. Aboriginal art was so little understood that it even fell outside the purview of most western art's romanticism of the 'primitive'. Hence Petty's surprise at its possible prominence in a future national gallery.

Since then there have been numerous critiques of the notion of 'primitive art', recognising it as a category constructed by artistic modernism. In the early twentieth century European artists tended to appropriate examples of Indigenous arts, which then only exist in subordinate relations to western art, which creates archetypes of universal human creativity.[26] These critiques found a particular focus in responses to the 1984 Museum of Modern Art in New York exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* in which curator William Rubin traced the impact of 'tribal' arts on major modernist art movements of the twentieth century, suggesting an affinity that was merely on the basis of abstract design and certainly not any kind of intimate relationship or understanding.[27]

Perhaps as a response to the notion of 'primitivism', and certainly from a sense of the mythologising of Australian identity, the inclusion of Aboriginal art had actually been part of the planning for the National Gallery since the mid-1960s. It remained submerged beneath other priorities and was conveniently ignored by director James Mollison.[28] As early as 1965, the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board presented some discussion notes they had compiled on a National Art Gallery in Canberra to the National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry, and here many of the ideas discussed earlier in the 1962 Australian National University seminar resurfaced. The notes made reference to the title 'National Gallery of Australian Art', and stated that 'the present buying policy is directed towards acquiring Australian works',[29] perhaps with consideration for a future gallery. One suggestion made was that 'a National Gallery should collect the art of Australia's neighbours in the Asian, South East Asian, and Oceania areas — even perhaps regional art of the Pacific coasts of the Americas … Australian state galleries contain very little of the art of these areas',[30] it was noted.

In particular, the suggestion for a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia was maintained, although it appeared that this was then being proposed as an independent institution (later to be linked to the 1975 proposal for a National Museum).

Yet when the Gallery Committee presented its final report in March 1966 it confirmed that the National Collection should include 'Australian Aboriginal art, chosen for aesthetic merit' and 'art representing the high cultural achievement of Australia's neighbours in southern and eastern Asia and the Pacific Islands — a collection of the latter before its disappearance being a matter of urgency'.[31] Clearly, these arts were not seen as living traditions. The report added that 'Aboriginal work is intended to be included in Australian art' and its acquisition should not be 'for anthropological reasons …'[32] Following concerns that at first there would not be enough work to fill the building, the committee even recommended borrowing Aboriginal art from various Commonwealth departments, state galleries and at least one state university.[33]

The first acquisition of Aboriginal art by the National Gallery was in 1972 — a group of 1950s bark paintings from Groote Eylandt. This was followed in 1976 by a collection of 139 barks by the renowned Yirawala from West Arnhem Land. These acquisitions were both donations, not purchases, but in 1979–80 the Gallery started buying carvings and paintings created by living Aboriginal artists. Ruth McNicoll (Acting Curator of Primitive Art) was sent to Arnhem Land to visit artists and communities, although the collection remained very small at this stage. Earlier, in 1977, art dealer Clive Evatt, who had represented Aboriginal art in his Sydney Hogarth Galleries since 1972, had reflected on the Committee of Inquiry's recommendation for the inclusion of Aboriginal art, and noted that 'this vital part of Australian art has been mimimised apparently in order not to overlap with the collection in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies'.[34] No-one then employed in the development of the National Gallery collection gave it any priority. Perhaps these new collecting efforts were a response to this criticism, although the Gallery certainly was conscious of not treading on the territory of other collecting institutions. The Committee of Inquiry had, in notes provided to the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board in 1965, suggested that state galleries should specialise and not be competitive with each other.[35] While this was a consideration for the National Gallery, it was hardly an issue in the collecting of Aboriginal art, which was generally regarded as the preserve of museums of natural history.

Radical change was, however, taking place. New forms of art, such as the acrylic canvases from Papunya,[36] enabled Aboriginal art to be seen, for the first time, as contemporary art. The 1970s saw the development of government-funded art centres in remote Aboriginal communities, established to coordinate, promote and sell Indigenous art, often as a way of creating an economic base for community financial independence. The Australia Council incorporated an Aboriginal Arts Board in 1973, which was also aimed at supporting the production and distribution of Aboriginal art.[37] These developments encouraged Aboriginal artists to produce work for the art market and began to make Aboriginal art more readily available. Public art museums and subsequently a wide range of commercial galleries began to support this trend.

Director James Mollison, like many museum curators, at first believed that Aboriginal art belonged in the museum

and not the gallery, until he visited Central Australia in late 1981 for a meeting of the Australian Gallery Directors' Council. He made a further visit to Ramingining the following year.[38] The National Gallery, while not initially enthusiastic about collecting Aboriginal art, did, as already noted, begin to expand on a very small collection of 'primitive' art in the late 1970s (adding to work collected by the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board from places such as Papua New Guinea, in advance of its independence). By 1981 it included what were described in the annual report as 'several typical and excellent bark paintings by artists living and working in their tribal areas in Arnhem Land', as well as 'a set of objects connected with the Morning Star ceremony, decorated with finely-twisted bush string and clusters of the delicate plumage of tropical birds'.[39] The artists were not acknowledged individually and these descriptions were curiously incidental, even in their placement in the report, coming after descriptions of acquisitions of Indonesian and Peruvian textiles, pre-Columbian ceramics, and Nigerian bronzes.[40] Yet Mollison was now a convert, considering Aboriginal art to be one of the great art traditions of the world and describing it, according to curator Wally Caruana, as 'akin to living in Florence at the time of the Renaissance'.[41]

Just before the opening of the Gallery in 1982, the name of the Department of Primitive Art was changed to Arts of Aboriginal Australia, Oceania, African and Pre-Columbian America (also including American 'Indian' and 'Eskimo' art). While this reflected a new awareness of the misnomer 'primitive' as applied to the arts of indigenous peoples, it still lumped them all together in a grab bag of 'other' art. Asian art had a different status, particularly the art of India, China and Japan, which had long been studied in the west and was seen as both historical (rather than ahistorical) and as reaching aesthetic heights comparable to that of western art. In the National Gallery there was already a small department of Asian and South-East Asian Art, including Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Indonesian and Burmese art. Although the collection focused at first on objects of religious iconology from the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, it soon expanded to include textiles, especially from Indonesia. Contemporary Asian art was not yet collected.

At opening, the chronological Australian art display included a few examples of Aboriginal art, although at this stage they were shown more for historical or comparative interest, such as locating an Aboriginal work next to a Margaret Preston painting to indicate its influence on her work.[42] This was nevertheless remarkable, if only by acknowledging, in however minimal a way, the continued existence of Aboriginal cultural expressions in parallel with the survey of 'white' Australian art history. The National Gallery had much to learn about Indigenous culture, and its early displays included material that was secret/sacred, although it was rapidly removed as soon as the Gallery became aware of its status in Aboriginal communities.[43] The Gallery's commitment was reinforced by the inclusion of a specialist in Aboriginal art, Jennifer Hoff, in the Education Department in 1982.[44] The Gallery ran a short series of lectures on Aboriginal art for Members in 1983 and, in 1984, hosted the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Biennial meeting and associated conference on Aboriginal arts in contemporary Australia.[45]

The year 1984 also saw the creation of a separate Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art with its own budget for acquisitions and with a brief

to collect contemporary Aboriginal art, including urban art, and historical work when available. The curator, Wally Caruana, who had originally worked under Ruth McNicoll, was not an Indigenous person. He had, however, developed strong links with Indigenous communities across Australia, which he used to broaden both the focus of the collection and to develop good relations between the Gallery and Indigenous artists.

Past exhibitions of Aboriginal art in state galleries had been broad generic surveys of what was considered classic traditional art, and artists had remained unnamed, with the exception of the 1957 Art Gallery of Western Australia exhibition. By the 1980s and early 1990s Indigenous artists were becoming known by name — as individuals rather than as faceless representatives of a generalised culture. National Gallery exhibitions began to focus on regions or areas of interest and to highlight the work of particular individual artists. Among those who became prominent in Gallery exhibitions at this time were George Milpurrurru, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Yirawala and Rover Thomas.[46] In 1988 the Gallery purchased *The Aboriginal Memorial*, which has since become a major feature of the collection. However, the Gallery remained staunchly committed to its aesthetic premise, and little if any additional information was provided to visitors in these early years. Extended labels were uncommon and standard labels continued to refer only to artist, region, title, date and media. Later, with the influence of new ideas about visitor information, extended labels did offer some of the Dreaming stories, clan and geographic information. Education staff in the 1980s were advised by Curator of Education Terence Measham to speak only in aesthetic terms (of the formal properties of line, colour and form and media) about Aboriginal work: while it was acceptable to detail some of the stories linked to a bark or an acrylic painting, it was considered best to avoid anthropological or ethnographic material to support the understanding or interpretation of a work.[47]

This approach was typical of all Australian art museums at the time. Art historians and curators tended to believe that an anthropological approach to Indigenous art reinforced its status as 'other', perhaps a consequence of its remaining in the natural history museum for so long that, in Morphy's words, the 'art was lost in the ethnography'.[48] As anthropologists George Marcus and Fred Myers have pointed out, art was, and is still, despite postmodern critiques, defined 'by the creation of aesthetic experience through the disinterested contemplation of objects as art objects, removed from instrumental associations'.[49] While art insisted on its own autonomous space and saw itself as the one area which is open to all difference (all the while subsuming it in its own historical and critical discourses), the discipline of anthropology saw material culture as part of a whole social and cultural system. Recent historical critiques have enabled a breakdown of these rigid categories and it is now possible for the disciplines of art and anthropology to work together in analysing and understanding Indigenous cultures.[50] In the case of the National Gallery however, this generally remains little tested.

After 1984, the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art rapidly expanded its collection and eventually solo shows began to appear. The first was the *George Milpurrurru* exhibition in 1993. Increasingly, Aboriginal artists began to achieve career recognition for their individual creativity. They were also adapting to the demands of the art market, which encouraged the assessment of an artist's work in terms of career development and the discerning of influences and stylistic

changes. The Aboriginal art market was now well-established and was becoming increasingly internationalised. Collectors from Europe and the United States were major investors in the market. Through national and international exhibitions, Aboriginal art was heralded — the first time art from Australia was accorded the status of a major international force or movement.[51] The influential exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* was held in New York in 1988. This originated, however, not from an art museum but from a natural history museum, a joint effort of the South Australian Museum and the Asia Society Galleries in New York. By the mid- to late 1990s there was a boom in the international market for Aboriginal art (though while collectors, investors and dealers profited hugely, many of the artists still lived in poverty). Art museums contributed to this boom by their revaluing of Aboriginal art, reassuring the market with the certainty of institutional esteem.

Since 2002, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art collection has been overseen by an Indigenous curator, Brenda Croft, thus returning a measure of control of the representation of Indigenous culture to Indigenous people. The National Gallery's celebration of Aboriginal art has strengthened its own reputation, and at the same time increased the value placed on Indigenous cultures, both in Australia and overseas.

## *The Aboriginal Memorial*: aesthetics and politics

The year 1988 was a watershed in the history of Indigenous art in the National Gallery of Australia. In that bicentennial year of white settlement — or invasion — of Australia, the *Aboriginal Memorial* was installed in the Gallery and was intended as a potent symbol of both the struggles of Aboriginal people over the previous 200 years, and their survival. The Bicentenary was not a time of celebration for Aboriginal people. The National Gallery installation, comprising 200 hollow log coffins from Central Arnhem Land (one for each year of European occupation since 1788), is primarily a war memorial. The visitors' path through the *Memorial* follows that of the Glyde River in Arnhem Land and the hollow log coffins are placed in clan territory along the river. The initial idea for the project was developed by Djon Mundine, then the Ramingining Art Adviser in Central Arnhem Land. The work was created by a group of 43 artists, including senior artists such as Paddy Dhathangu and Jimmy Wululu. It represents 'a forest of souls, a war cemetery and the funeral rites for all indigenous Australians who have been denied a proper burial'.[52] In 1987, at an early stage of the project's development, Mundine offered the Memorial to the National Gallery and James Mollison then commissioned the work to financially enable the project to be completed. The Memorial was initially shown at the 1988 Biennale of Sydney, before being installed in the National Gallery.

The *Memorial*, until recently, stood in Gallery One, near the main entrance to the National Gallery. It is a powerful comment on the tragedy of 200 years of Aboriginal history since white invasion. Although the Gallery itself was evidently making a political statement through the location of the work, the *Memorial*'s reception there has never been controversial, despite its powerful message.[53] And it must be said that, because it incorporates traditional techniques and materials, it is still not necessarily perceived as a political statement by white audiences, especially when the Gallery contains other works that are much more overtly political. The *Memorial*'s cross-

*The Aboriginal Memorial* 1987–88
by Ramingining Artists, Central Arnhem Land
wood, natural pigments; maximum heights 327.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia


cultural nature, incorporating both traditional styles and materials and the form of western installation art, is open to misinterpretation, especially as, in Gallery One, it was surrounded by a survey of Aboriginal art on the walls, making its meaning indistinguishable from the broader survey.

This raises an important question. Does the environment of the art museum militate against its politics, encasing it in an aestheticised framework and consequently overriding its political meaning? The meaning of the *Memorial* is articulated thoroughly on the Gallery's website, but in the building itself, despite information being available on extended labels, its presentation tends to seal the work off in an aesthetic prism. The very ambience of the space reinforces this. Grand high ceilings, an elegantly tonal setting, labels carefully formatted and placed so as not to interfere with the visual apprehension of the art, the castle-like bush-hammered concrete walls and the highly visible uniformed guards reminding the visitor that the space contains valuable assets — all these things operate subliminally to adjust the visitor's behaviour and attitude, intended to quieten them physically and spiritually so that they might experience the art in reverential and silent contemplation. One's physical presence becomes diminished in inverse proportion to the works of art which are, after all, centre stage. The world of everyday life is abandoned at the door.[54]

Yet there is a museological desire to be part of an engaged cultural public sphere in which issues of common concern, especially moral and ethical ones, may be discussed. This requires an imposition of the everyday. Under director Brian Kennedy, the National Gallery believed that it should encourage debate and assume the role of a forum.[55] Aesthetic contemplation, in this context,

should not be the only goal. If the art has something to say, then the art museum should provide opportunities to debate it. Perhaps if the *Aboriginal Memorial* were in the National Museum, just across the lake from the Gallery, it would provoke a very different response, especially in the context of the 'history wars', in which interpretations of Australian history in the Museum have been hotly contested. The context of an array of historical and anthropological evidence would serve to shift the emphasis of the work, bringing its content, in the sense of its meaning, to centre stage, instead of privileging its aesthetic impact. In the National Gallery it is possible to separate the statement of the individual work of art from any perceived political stand of the institution itself. The fact that art demands autonomy, dissociating it from some social and critical contexts, can also allow the Gallery to be a site for often quite controversial statements, without the Gallery necessarily being seen as participating in the making of these statements. Unfortunately, this same apparent autonomy renders the art museum a willing participant, indeed collaborator, in the system of the art market. The market needs the art museum to affirm, by its professional and aesthetic judgements, the maintenance of an interdependent system of patronage and commodification. The work of the curator in selecting, ordering and interpreting works of art is not made visible, and this is quite deliberate. In the National Museum, the objects are not autonomous and therefore they become embedded in the museum's larger narrative. They are used first and foremost to illustrate a story, an idea, a period of time, or an experience, even when they might in other contexts be seen as purely aesthetic objects, or art.

Some artists have regarded the autonomy of the object as a way of enabling art to critique the institutions of art, along with broader social issues, yet the very placement of work within the Gallery is already complicit with the art market. In fact, the Gallery can appear to be 'objective' and 'even-handed' in including controversial work, by justifying its inclusion on purely aesthetic grounds.

In the resurgence of Aboriginal art in the late twentieth century, its power is as much political as it is aesthetic. Because so much Aboriginal art is closely linked to country, to Indigenous law and society, to Dreamings, or to their loss, and the removal of people from these connections, every work makes a claim about Aboriginal experience in this country. A major force in the international art scene and one of the most significant developments in Australian art, Aboriginal art is now a solid fixture in Australian cultural life, its quality and importance largely unquestioned. As art historian Sylvia Kleinert and curator Margo Neale have noted, 'it is clear that Australia's Indigenous people have used "art" to reaffirm their autonomous concerns, and they have deliberately sought to engage in dialogue with the colonising society'.[56] However, its impact is very different in the context of a history museum.

## The place of Aboriginal art and material culture in the National Museum of Australia

The National Museum of Australia owes its origins to the Pigott Report on Museums and National Collections, which was submitted to the Australian Government in 1975. The report recommended that a Museum of Australia be established in Canberra and that one of its main themes should be 'Aboriginal man in Australia'. The Pigott committee had commented that 'curiously, Aboriginal art had long been displayed impersonally in natural science museums in Australia but

only when Aboriginal art was "discovered" by art galleries did the artists become known as people rather than as nameless cyphers …'[57]

The committee's acknowledgement of the early role of art museums in the individualising of Aboriginal art is a reminder that while museums had been languishing in museological terms, galleries had been becoming more adventurous and exploratory. These were early days for the presentation of Aboriginal art in Australian art museums, yet the Pigott committee was already well aware of a dramatic shift occurring. Observing that there was no major institution in Australia that really focused on history, the authors recognised that the directors of early natural history museums in Australia were mostly biologists or geologists and this was where the emphasis of these museums lay. These early museums were also interested in the development of humans, but from an evolutionary perspective, thus depicting Aborigines, according to the Pigott Report, as 'living exemplars of one of the earliest stages in the evolution of mankind'.[58] The report noted that Professor Baldwin Spencer, a biologist and honorary director of the Museum of Victoria from 1899 to 1928, believed that Aborigines remained on the cultural level of the Stone Age. Thus, they said, Aboriginal people 'were treated as living fossils … only recently have they been seen by museums as people rather than fauna'.[59] It also noted that this attitude to Indigenous people was not confined to Australia, but could also be seen in museums in America, France and Britain. For Australian museums, Aboriginal culture (seen at this time as just *one* culture) was located firmly in a model of ethnography and natural history. Just as James Mollison had once believed that Aboriginal art belonged in the natural history museum, these museums were unable or unwilling to see Aboriginal society outside the limits of their natural science disciplines. Not surprisingly, the committee of inquiry concluded that 'one of the strongest arguments we offer … for a new national museum in Australia is the belief that there both the Aboriginal and European histories of Australia can be seen in a wider and fairer perspective'[60] — effectively a proposal for a more cross-cultural institution.

At the same time that the Pigott Report was being compiled, a separate planning committee, convened by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, was created to report on establishing a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia.[61] Including Aboriginal representatives and chaired by Professor John Mulvaney,[62] it was to report to the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections (of which Mulvaney was also a member). Mulvaney's report noted: 'that any National Museum established in Canberra would include ethnographic material has been implicit since 1934 when the Australian Government transferred to Canberra what was termed "The National Ethnographic Collection"',[63] which was then stored in the basement of the recently completed Australian Institute of Anatomy.[64] It remarked on the requirement to have 'the active and sympathetic participation of Aboriginal people in its planning, staffing, control and operation — a recognition of the political need for Aboriginal self-determination'.[65] The report observed that 'the standing of such a Gallery in Australian national life may come to be seen as an index of its cultural maturity'.[66] Mulvaney's report should be seen in the context of scholarly debates that had begun, in the 1960s, to focus on race relations in Australia and the representation of Aboriginal people in its history books.[67] The fact that Mulvaney was an archaeologist and historian who promoted interdisciplinary

Aboriginal studies was also hugely important. Although anthropologists had done much of the research on Indigenous cultures to this point, the field was becoming increasingly multidisciplinary. Increasing understanding of Aboriginal society and history, and recognition of the urgent need for tolerance and social justice, were features of public debate in the Whitlam Labor Government years and, gradually, attitudes within an informed public began to shift. WEH Stanner's 1968 ABC Boyer lectures[68] had prompted increased awareness of the injustices suffered by Aboriginal people, and it was in these lectures that he coined his now well-known term 'the great Australian silence' to prod a complacent public into action.[69]

Mulvaney's report maintained the importance of autonomy for the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, although it also recognised the desirability of cooperation with any collocated, and complementary, institutions. Integration or a close association with the newly created Aboriginal Arts Board and, in particular, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was considered important to ensure productive collaboration without duplication of efforts. Mulvaney placed primary importance on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia conveying 'the unique spirituality and creativity of Aboriginal society' and stated that this was not meant to be seen as a 'gesture of restitution — repairing a guilty national conscience' or as merely having 'relevance for, or to be used by Aborigines only'.[70] It was to be far more active and engaged, promoting genuine understanding in the context of ongoing research and dialogue.

The Pigott and Mulvaney reports, informed by a revisionary anthropology and the new social history, were of their time, but that time had passed when the National Museum of Australia opened. Not only had politics shifted dramatically to the conservatism of Liberal Prime Minister John Howard, but the tenets of the new museology in the interim had also pushed the Museum further out of kilter with government and bureaucratic expectations in the early twenty-first century.

Envisaging 'mutual understanding' and education, the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia was to respect the dignity of Aboriginal culture and society. Aboriginal people, like other Indigenous peoples around the world, had misgivings about the way museums had previously treated their cultures.[71] In particular, concerns were expressed that the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia should not be run by Europeans, and that it must not display items of a secret or sacred nature, or bones of the dead.[72] Another concern was that items of material culture should not be hoarded (as had been so common a practice in museums), but instead returned to their original owners. It was considered important that research should be relevant to Aboriginal needs, rather than benefiting white scholars, and that the Gallery should encourage Aboriginal people as visitors.[73]

Investigating the Australian Institute of Anatomy and its collections, then under the responsibility of the Department of Health, the committee noted that the institute held the priceless National Ethnographic Collection, in a poor, cramped and un-air-conditioned space.[74] The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was concerned that the collection was deteriorating. Consequently, it was suggested that the Australian Institute of Anatomy building be used to 'implement promptly the proposed national museum though on a very small scale' and that it could be used as temporary headquarters (up to six or seven years) during the planning and design phases for a first stage of a museum of national history.[75]

While supporting the report of Mulvaney's Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, the Pigott committee expressed reservations about it being governed as a separate statutory authority, doubting that divided management could achieve an integrated museum of national history. Included in the aims for the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia was the study of '200 years of Aboriginal contact with non-Aboriginal society since 1788, emphasising the grim consequences for Aboriginal culture but also the survival and recent revival of that culture'.[76]

The vision of the Pigott Report (though truncated in scale) for the expression of Aboriginal culture and identity was faithfully maintained through all the long planning years of the National Museum and the proposed Gallery of Aboriginal Australia finally took form in First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.[77] The First Australians gallery became the focus of heated debate over the nature and uses of history, particularly because it did not resile from the more difficult aspects of Aboriginal history since white settlement. The nature of historical evidence and the use of art to focus debate were particularly contested. The oral (and written) record of massacres, the dispossession of Aboriginal land, practices on Christian missions, life as fringe dwellers, the restriction of Aboriginal people on reserves, and the stories of the 'stolen generations', including oral testimony, were presented in a frank and open style. The gallery was quickly attacked as including too much speculative material and for placing too much emphasis on oral testimony.[78] Parallel with this history is a respectful, sometimes celebratory, survey of traditional life, new achievements, and continued struggles for native title and human rights. What is evident throughout is a sense of the contemporary vitality of Aboriginal cultures, especially as the historical and oral record is interspersed with Aboriginal works of art that, in this context, become as much political manifestos as cultural and spiritual expressions, radically different from the National Gallery. In the National Museum the art functions variously as historical statement, record of country, land claim and symbol of the continuing cultures that refuse to be erased. The art is integral to the anthropological and historical record.

Arguably, while there are examples of different language groups and clans, the First Australians gallery gives an overall impression of pan-Aboriginality, although this is itself a political statement enabling identification of common concerns. A Review of the Museum's exhibitions and public programs in 2003[79] recognised the effectiveness of First Australians and, unlike some areas of the museum, it survived relatively unscathed.

National Museum programs have incorporated a range of strategies to ensure the participation of Indigenous people, in addition to telling their own stories in exhibitions. While this reciprocity and the inclusion of Indigenous commentary have established the possibility of multiple narratives in the Museum, the Tracking Kultja festival in 2001 was aimed at changing how Indigenous people perceive museums. Emphasising cross-cultural exchange and learning, it incorporated forums, music, broadcasts, lectures, arts and crafts demonstrations, markets, theatre, dance and Indigenous language workshops. Visits by Indigenous people to private storage areas allowed them to view and handle objects from their communities. The result for non-Indigenous visitors, through direct exposure, was the creation of a new awareness of Indigenous culture outside the confines of academic interpretations. For

Indigenous participants and visitors, it gave them a strong presence and voice within the Museum. Overall, it was another step in the project of reconciliation.

The National Museum also runs a repatriation program that is aimed at ensuring the proper return of Indigenous human remains, from museums around the world, to their original communities. It seeks to locate remains, identify their origin, and have the Museum act as a 'halfway house' until negotiations determine agreement on final resting places. The program is funded by the Commonwealth Government for 'the care and management of remains returned to Australia'. This includes 'the temporary care of remains needing to be provenanced, the return of remains to communities, and the care of remains on behalf of communities or of those remains that cannot be provenanced'.[80] These are all activities first mooted by the Pigott and Mulvaney reports.[81]

The years between the Pigott Report and the opening of the National Museum witnessed a flowering of both contemporary and traditional Aboriginal art, gradually championed and celebrated in art museums, especially the National Gallery. Now, institutions such as the South Australian Museum, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Museum of Western Australia, the Museum of Sydney, the Queensland Museum and more recently the new Bunjilaka gallery in the Museum of Melbourne have all taken a broad view of Indigenous history and culture, exploring regional histories and including art and material culture in their displays.[82] They have welcomed the participation of and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the development of their collections, exhibitions and associated activities. These approaches are now considered 'best practice', especially in light of the general acceptance of Museum Australia's 1993 guidelines on Indigenous collections 'Previous Possessions, New Obligations' (updated in 2004 under the title 'Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities: Principles and guidelines for Australian museums working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage'), which set out a range of ethical principles and practices designed to avoid the pitfalls and misunderstandings of the past. The National Museum has a strong record of achievement, acquired in just a few short years, but its primary challenge now is to maintain its commitment to a reciprocity between Indigenous people and the Museum and between Indigenous people and white Australians — particularly at a time when public debate on the moral record of postcolonial Indigenous experience is held up in some circles as divisive or as an attempt to belittle white Australia.[83]

## Conclusion

Nearly two decades separated the openings of the National Gallery and the National Museum. When the Gallery opened in 1982 it was the crowning expression of a largely unquestioned will to modernity, born of a 1960s vision of a national tribute to Australian cultural maturity and achievement. The National Gallery has grown and changed over the intervening years, responding to new social critiques and adapting to museological changes. Its modern conception, however, has been maintained and its adaptations are essentially around the edges rather than at its core. In contrast, the National Museum might be said to have had two 'births'. The first was in 1975, when its establishment was recommended by the Pigott Report on

Australian museums, and was followed by its formalising in legislation in 1980. The second was in 2001, when the Museum opened its doors to the public. These events coincided with two distinctive public celebrations: 1975 was the first International Women's Year, which served as a catalyst for feminist thought and critiques. Australia at this time was still experiencing the cultural renaissance ushered in by the Whitlam Government elected in 1972. The Centenary of Federation occurred in 2001, a year when the project of Reconciliation appeared to be foundering and Australia, under a conservative government, seemed to re-engage with many of its colonial myths, such as a belief in a peaceful colonial past. Conceptually, the National Museum belongs to the original 1975 vision when, rather than continuing to gestate and change for years, it actually was already philosophically fully formed. So, despite having to wait another 26 years, the Museum kept faith with both the spirit and the major recommendations of its original brief (and although tempered by alterations in size and location and a newly competitive collecting field, the Museum held the philosophical ground of its foundational document).[84] Instead, the tenets of the Pigott Report were reaffirmed and refined by developments in museological thinking and by the acceleration of Aboriginal activism and the explosion of contemporary Aboriginal art. Despite the shifting fortunes of the project under a series of directors, the Museum had failed in the beginning to secure initial funding, instead focusing on creating the ideal vision seen in the Pigott Report. Shortly after the report was published, the Whitlam Government lost office and the political will to create the Museum disappeared, despite its establishment by a 1980 Act of Parliament. John Mulvaney, nevertheless kept pushing for the Museum's realisation, particularly keeping its unique vision alive. When it finally opened in 2001, the political moment had shifted radically and so the Museum faced a struggle with its political masters that might not have occurred if it had opened in 1990, as originally planned.

Indigenous cultures and histories have been one of the primary sites for public debates about the nature and character of Australia and its people. Museums play a big role in this reflexive process, not just by their collection and exhibition choices, but also by framing these choices in ways that encourage informed deliberation and questioning.

Essentially, the time from the opening of the National Gallery to the opening of the National Museum charts a major shift in museological practices in relation to Indigenous cultures and histories. The dynamic of the acceptance and then celebration of Aboriginal art, paralleled with the early vision of the Pigott Report, laid the foundation for new developments in museum interpretations of Aboriginal history.

The early years of planning for the National Gallery and subsequently the National Museum began to reveal new roles for Aboriginal art, history and material culture. Political activism, from the Freedom Ride in 1965 to the Land Rights movement, and new historical research generated new understandings of the Aboriginal history of Australia since settlement, and began to instil new respect for Aboriginal art and culture.[85] Art museums led the way in these new approaches, championing Aboriginal art from an aesthetic rather than a purely ethnographic perspective (even though this came with its own problems), and recognising the creativity of individual artists, who were no longer seen as just generic representatives of their culture. By giving Aboriginal art its imprimatur, the National Gallery contributed to

the legitimisation of Aboriginal art as a sophisticated expression of Indigenous achievements and aspirations.

The National Museum, well aware of Indigenous mistrust of museums due to the long western history of mistreatment of Indigenous cultures by museums, sought a new range of strategies to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their activities and programs. The written and the oral record were each given recognition, personal testimony became a potent reminder of struggle and pain, and works of art not only celebrated the survival of Indigenous cultures, but could also be recognised as visual records of country, of history and of Dreamings. The use of this range of material to express and interpret Aboriginal history came under fire even before the opening in 2001 and the basic premises of new ways of doing history came under vehement attack.

If the museum is doing its job, however, these public debates can be as transformative as they are frustrating, although the museum must be able to engage in the debate on equal terms with its interrogators, without interference designed to perpetrate seamless and singular stories instead of diverse ones. While much remains contested, there is a new willingness to engage with Indigenous life and to see it as an intrinsic part of Australian cultural identity.

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This paper has been independently peer-reviewed.

## Notes

1 These institutions also include collections of Torres Strait Islander art, but for the purposes of this article I will deal only with Aboriginal collections. While my use of the term 'Indigenous' here refers specifically to Aboriginal cultures and societies, it also incorporates the international political discourse of 'threatened people', sometimes called 'First Nations'.

2 Howard Morphy, 'Seeing Aboriginal art in the gallery', *Humanities Research*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2001, p. 38.

3 'Draft report of the National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry', 1965, p. 7.

4 ibid.

5 ibid.

6 The 1967 referendum, although celebrated as giving Aboriginal people recognition as citizens (they actually had the Commonwealth vote in 1962, except in Queensland), merely allowed the federal government to make any laws necessary for the welfare of Aboriginal people, and allowed them to be counted in the census. Nevertheless, it was an important recognition of the rights and needs of Aboriginal people.

7 There is a good account of this and other exhibitions in Philip Jones, 'Perceptions of Aboriginal art: A history', in Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking, Ringwood, 1988.

8 Grenfell Ruddock, 'Galleries and museums of art', reporting on a seminar held in Canberra, September 1962, *Architecture in Australia*, vol. 52, no. 1, March, 1963, p. 101.

9 ibid.

10 Frances Derham (1894–1987) was an art teacher who visited Aboriginal missions at Hermannsburg, Central Australia (1938) and Aurukun (North Queensland) in 1948. She held art classes for the children, encouraging them to draw and paint about their lives. The collection of drawings they made is now held in the National Gallery of Australia. Margaret Preston was an artist who was inspired by the

colours and design of Aboriginal art and was one of the first in the art world to recognise it as an independent art form. See Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788–1970*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1971 (2nd edition); and Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

11 McLean, *White Aborigines*, pp. 79–80.

12 ibid., p. 88.

13 Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1958.

14 In *The Australian Legend*, Ward described the bush legend of Australia as fully developed by the 1890s, and producing a myth of the Australian (male) as rough but egalitarian, independent but loyal to his mates and conscious of the need for a 'fair-go'.

15 See Alison French's exhibition and catalogue, *Seeing the Centre: The Art of Albert Namatjira 1902–1959*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2002; and McLean, *White Aborigines*.

16 Ian McLean, *White Aborigines*, referred to the desert usurping the bush as a national metaphor in Australia in the 1930s and that, by the Second World War and after, Aboriginality was incorporated into national myths.

17 For example, Henry Reynolds' work (see Notes 67 and 69).

18 After the 1967 referendum, the history and experiences of Aboriginal people became more prominent. In 1973, the Australia Council established the Aboriginal Arts Board and arts centres were set up in many Indigenous communities. Awareness of Indigenous needs and interests was becoming more widespread. For further discussion, see Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking, Ringwood, 1988, particularly chapter five, pp. 143–79.

19 Graeme Petty, 'The national collection of primitive art Canberra', in *Art and Australia*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1971, p. 3. In fact, this was a reference to the National Ethnographic Collection, then housed in the Institute of Anatomy in Canberra.

20 ibid., and McLean, *White Aborigines*, p. 3.

21 Petty, 'The national collection', p. 3.

22 See, for example, the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 1984, curated by William Rubin, and the accompanying catalogue, William Rubin (ed.), *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art*, vols 1 and 2, MoMA, New York, 1985.

23 Franz Boas was a German anthropologist, best known for his book *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911). He published a book on the art of Indigenous cultures in 1927 called *Primitive Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

24 See Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1938.

25 ibid.

26 See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988; Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1990; Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1989.

27 See the two-volume catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, Rubin, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art*.

28 This was despite urgings by anthropologist Anthony Forge, a member of the 'Primitive Art' collection advisory committee: interview with Professor Luke Taylor, Deputy-Principal, Research, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), 5 August 2005.

29 'National Art Gallery for Canberra: Preliminary notes for discussion by Art Advisory Board, 11th August, 1965', in Tas Drysdale's papers, as member of National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry, collection of Mary Eagle, Canberra, p. 3. These papers were circulated to the Committee members for consideration. Although Tas (Russell) Drysdale did not attend committee meetings (he was overseas), he maintained constant communication with the Committee and wrote many submissions to it.

30 ibid., p. 4.

31 'Draft' report, p. 3.

32 *Report of the National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry*, Canberra, 1966, p. 12.

33 ibid., p. 3.

34 Cited by Peter Tomory, 'The acquisition policy from the inside out', in papers from Art Association of Australia seminar *Australian*

*Public Gallery Acquisition Policies*, Melbourne, 28 May 1977, p. 30.

35 'National Art Gallery for Canberra: Preliminary notes', p. 3.

36 In 1971 Geoff Bardon, an art teacher, began to encourage the people of Papunya to paint, with western acrylic paints and canvas, but using their own traditional designs and stories. This now legendary movement generated a major commercial market for contemporary Aboriginal art. See S Kleinert, and M Neale, (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000; Susan McCulloch, *Contemporary Aboriginal Art: A Guide to the Rebirth of an Ancient Culture*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 1999; Fred R Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002.

37 In establishing the Australia Council, with its boards representing different areas of the arts, Gough Whitlam sought to create an administration that provided 'independence from political pressures and safeguards against centralised and authoritarian tendencies'. Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government*, Viking, Ringwood, 1985, p. 558.

38 Curator Wally Caruana detailed Mollison's 'epiphany' in his essay, 'The collection of Indigenous Australian art: Beginnings and some highlights', in Pauline Green (ed.), *Building the Collection*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2003.

39 Report on 'Australian Aboriginal, African, Oceanic, pre-Columbian American and North American Indian art and Indonesian textiles', in *Australian National Gallery Annual Report 1980–81*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1982, pp. 41–2.

40 ibid.

41 Caruana, 'The collection of Indigenous Australian art', pp. 194, 199.

42 I am aware of this from personal experience, but it has also been noted in Andrew Sayers' essay in the National Gallery's 20th Anniversary publication: Green (ed.), *Building the Collection*, p. 121.

43 This has never been publicly discussed, but I am aware of this from my own experience working in the Gallery at the time.

44 Interview with Alison French, who was employed, along with the author, in the Gallery's Education Department in the first few years after opening.

45 *Australian National Gallery Annual Report 1983–84*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1984, p. 50.

46 These included *My Country, My Story: Recent Paintings by Twelve Arnhem Land Artists*; *Ancestors and Spirits: Aboriginal Painting from Arnhem Land in the 1950s and 1960s*; and *Aboriginal Art of Western Australia* (all in the 1986–87 financial year), and *The Art of George Milpurrurru* (1992–93), the first at the National Gallery to focus on an individual Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artist.

47 Interview with Alison French. French also considered that Measham's directive was part of an intention to allow only specialist Jennifer Hoff to use anthropological material in discussion of Aboriginal works of art, keeping the disciplines of art history and anthropology quite distinct.

48 Morphy, 'Seeing Aboriginal art in the gallery', p. 43.

49 George Marcus and Fred Myers (eds), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p. 3.

50 See Marcus and Myers, *The Traffic in Culture*; and Myers, *Painting Culture*.

51 See Vivien Johnson's assessment of the Aboriginal art market in 'Private collectors and the Aboriginal art market', in Jon Altman and Luke Taylor (eds), *Marketing Aboriginal Art in the 1990s*, Papers presented to a workshop in Canberra 12–13 June 1990, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1990, pp. 37–42.

52 'The Aboriginal Memorial', http:www.nga.gov.au/memorial/intro.html, accessed 8 August 2003.

53 I have been unable to find any negative reports about this installation in the National Gallery, either in the media or in arts industry publications.

54 Angela Philp, field notes, 2003.

55 'Strategies', in *National Gallery of Australia Corporate Plan 1999–2001: Into the New Millenium*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1998, no pagination.

56 Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, 'Preface', in Kleinert and Neale, *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, p. vii.

57 *Museums in Australia 1975: Report of the Planning*

*Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections including the Report of the Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1975, p. 5, known generally as the Pigott Report. Around the same time (1974), a parallel inquiry by the Hope Committee produced a report on the National Estate, primarily considering immovable heritage: historic sites and buildings. Its recommendations were also reflected in the Pigott Report.

58 Pigott Report, p. 16.

59 ibid.

60 ibid., p. 17.

61 The Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia included Professor John Mulvaney as chairman, K Colbung (an Indigenous leader who championed the cause of land rights education and Aboriginal cultural identity), R Edwards (responsible for the 1981 Report on Museum Policy and Development in South Australia), J Gwadbu (an Indigenous man from Goulburn Island), PK Lauer (anthropologist), DR Moore, H Parker, Dick Roughsey (the first chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board, Australia Council), WEH Stanner (anthropologist), PJ Ucko (archaeologist) and M Valadian (an Indigenous writer and researcher on Aboriginal education).

62 Mulvaney is an archaeologist and emeritus professor of prehistory at the Australian National University. Over many years he has been a public advocate for Aboriginal heritage and for the National Museum of Australia. See Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths, (eds), *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996.

63 A Commonwealth collection, the National Ethnographic Collection, in 1975, included 10,000 Aboriginal objects, excluding a large and mainly uncatalogued collection of stone tools, as well as 10,000 objects of Oceanic and South-East Asian origin. Not as extensive as collections held in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, it was regionally fairly representative. It was added to before 1975 by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

64 John Mulvaney, *Gallery of Aboriginal Australia: Report of the Planning Committee*, an attachment to the Pigott Report, p. 3.

65 ibid., p. 5.

66 ibid.

67 At this time the term 'Aboriginal' was taken to include both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Scholars writing Aboriginal histories at this time included Henry Reynolds (*Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987), Rhys Jones (*Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits and Proper Names*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1974), Charles Rowley (*The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1970) and Lyndall Ryan (*The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1981).

68 WEH Stanner, *After the Dreaming: Black and White Australians — An Anthropologist's View*, the 1968 Boyer Lectures, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1969.

69 Bill Stanner was a well-known Australian anthropologist whose research focused on the links between art, the sacred and the secular in Aboriginal society. Like Mulvaney, he was a public advocate for a better understanding of Aboriginal culture and society. His term 'the great Australian silence' referred to the erasure of Aboriginal people from the story of British colonial history and their continued erasure up until the 1960s when a new generation of historians (such as Reynolds and Rowley) began to research and write about Indigenous history and experience.

70 Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, p. 7.

71 See Ivan Karp and D Steven (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC, 1991; and 'Preamble', *Previous Possessions, New Obligations: Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Museums Australia, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 3–5.

72 Museums Australia, *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*, p. 4; and Mulvaney, *Gallery of Aboriginal Australia*, pp. 19–20.

73 Mulvaney, *Gallery of Aboriginal Australia*, pp. 19–20.

74 ibid., p. 15.

75 Pigott Report, p. 43.

76 *Report of the Interim Council: Plan for the Development of the Museum of Australia*, Museum of Australia, Canberra, 1982, p. 39.

77 The Gallery of First Australians was eventually

presided over by Indigenous curator Margo Neale. A previous curator, Djon Mundine, was also Indigenous, and both, interestingly, are from visual art backgrounds. Similarly, another curator, anthropologist Luke Taylor, was a specialist in Aboriginal art.

78 See Keith Windschuttle, 'How not to run a museum: People's history at the postmodern museum', *Quadrant*, vol. 45, no. 9, September 2001, p. 19. See also Keith Windschuttle, 'History, anthropology and the politics of Aboriginal sovereignty', paper delivered at the Samuel Griffith Society Annual Conference, Melbourne, 1 September 2001; 'When history falls victim to politics', *Age*, 14 July 2001; 'History, truth and postmodernism', *The Great Debate, HSC Extension History Conference*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 27 July 2002.

79 *Review of the National Museum of Australia: Its Exhibitions and Public Programs: A Report to the Council of the National Museum of Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003.

80 Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) website http://www.immi.gov.au/annual_report/annrep05/pdf/11-pt2-outcome5.pdf, accessed 19 February 2006. The DIMIA 2004–05 *Annual Report* (Outcome 5) notes that 'at 30 June 2005, 554 remains were managed by the NMA under this contract'.

81 Piggot Report.

82 *Bunjilaka* (which means land of the creator) worked in collaboration with Victoria's Aboriginal people and incorporates social histories showing the diversity of their communities. See Lynette Russell, 'Bunjilaka brooding' in *Meanjin*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2001, pp. 99–103; and Rodney Carter, 'Bunjilaka Aboriginal Centre', conference paper in *Fringe Benefits: Community, Culture and Communication*, Museums Australia National Conference, Albury, May 1999.

83 Some members of the print media in Australia reacted very strongly against the museum, especially journalist Miranda Devine, in 'A nation trivialized — white history a bad joke', *Daily Telegraph*, 12 March 2001. See also comments by Windschuttle, 'How not to run a museum', pp. 11–19.

84 For an analysis of the changes since 1975, see SG Foster, 'Yesterday and tomorrow at the National Museum of Australia', *borderlands*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2004 www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol3no3_2004/foster_yesterday.htm.

85 The Freedom Ride, in February 1965, was described by Professor Ann Curthoys, who was a participant, as 'a group of uni students [travelling] around country towns in NSW protesting racial discrimination'. One of these students was Aboriginal leader Charles Perkins, later to become Head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and a prominent activist. See Ann Curthoys, 'The Freedom Ride — its significance today', a public lecture at the National Museum of Australia, 4 September 2002. See also Ann Curthoys, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2002.

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Angela Philp completed her PhD at The Australian National University in 2006. Her thesis was titled 'Museums and the public sphere in Australia: Between rhetoric and practice' and explored expressions of the new museology and the ability to fully realise its aims. It included both the National Museum of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia as case studies. She has worked in museums for many years, including the National Gallery, the Nolan Gallery, and the Canberra Museum and Gallery where she was inaugural director. She has also taught art history and, more recently, contributed to the Australian National University's Museums and Collections program.