

Art from Arnhem Land

Louis A. Allen,
with introduction by Joyce Zibro

One definition of a work of art is that it has a life of its own. That is, it has a universal appeal. It can be removed from its particular context, from the community in which it was produced, to a place where its associations, purposes, and meaning are unknown, and yet it can be appreciated. By this definition the bark paintings and wood carvings produced by the aboriginal people of Arnhem Land in northern Australia are certainly works of art. Almost 400 examples of this art are in the temporary exhibit opening at Field Museum on February 3. This largest group ever shown is from the collection of Mr. Louis A. Allen of Palo Alto, California.

However, these objects were not meant to stand alone as "art for art's sake." They have functional roles, are integral parts of the complex social and religious ceremonies of the technologically simple hunting and gathering culture of the Arnhem Landers.

Mr. Allen's collection is especially important for viewers who wish to see this art in relation to its cultural context because each specimen is so fully documented with information

about the artist, where he lived, and the subject matter, style, and technique.

Art is not categorized as such in Arnhem Land society. In fact, there are no words in Australian aboriginal languages equivalent to our words "art" or "artist." Most men in these societies can paint, carve, and incise. There are usually some who are regarded as being better at it than others or as having definite rights through age or status to practice "art" or some aspect of it.

The Arnhem Land artist is confined to a set of traditional rules that determine both subject matter and design. Although the work of individual artists varies in subtle ways, individual "creative" expression is restricted.

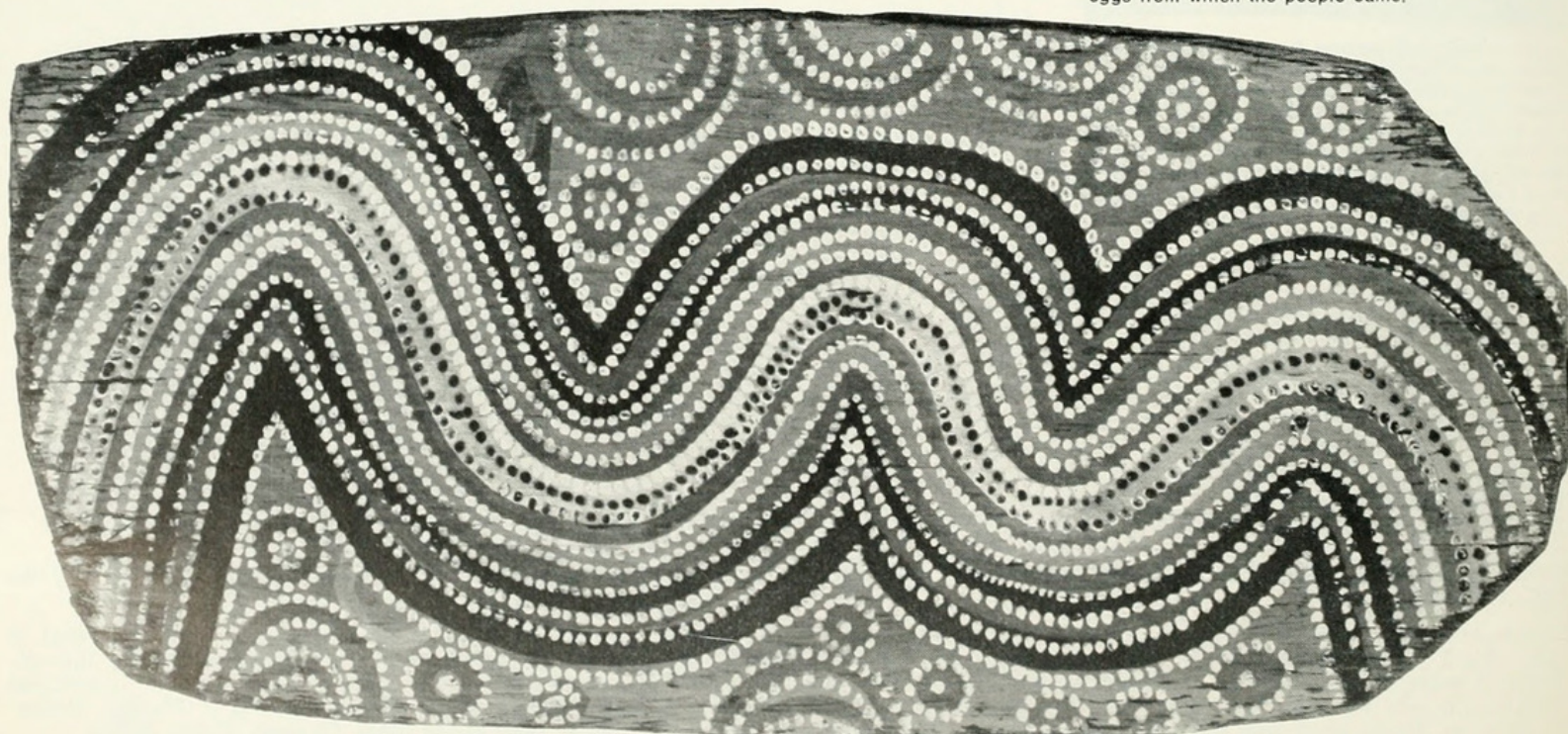
Much of Arnhem Land art is representational, though it may vary from naturalistic to highly stylized, and in this sense abstract, representation. And it may also express either symbolic meaning or merely descriptive narrative. The art may be appreciated for just its representational subject matter—the human figures, animals, trees, or abstract designs standing for clouds, rain, and so on.

But to understand the meanings of the art, either the symbolic content or the stories told, requires special knowledge about religious beliefs and the world view of the local community.

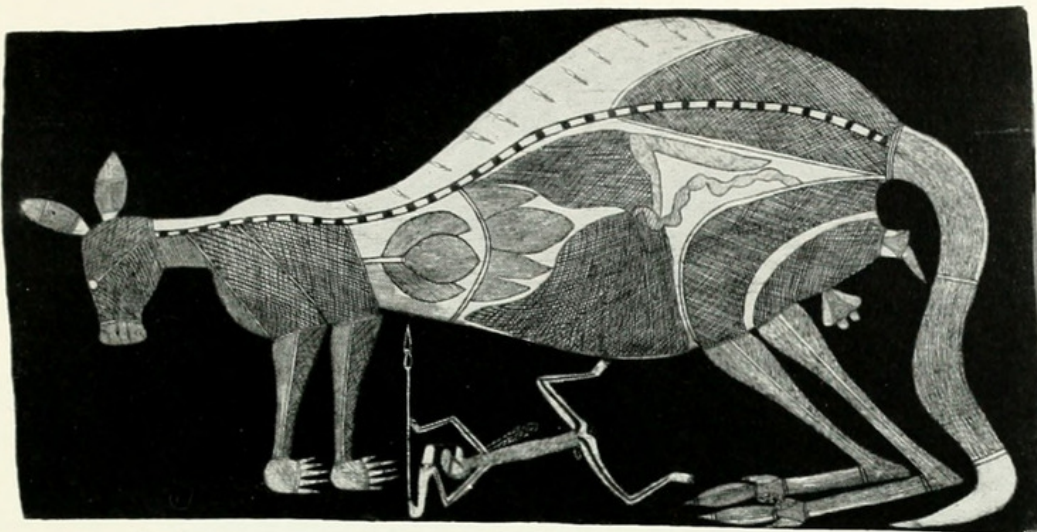
Dr. Ronald M. Berndt, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Western Australia, has pointed out, "Representational or 'abstract' art designed to convey meaning either to an entire community, or to certain categories of persons within it, can be understood only by those belonging to that society, and sharing its particular tradition. To be able to interpret the design and its symbolic significance there must be shared recognition, otherwise such designs and symbols become meaningless, or may be accorded quite different meanings. There is further parallel here with language: We can hear the sounds, but unless we know the language we cannot hope to understand those sounds, to derive meaning from them."

Appreciation at this level constitutes understanding the art as a medium of communication within the community.

The rainbow snake, painted by Indi, Port Keats region. Many tribes of Arnhem Landers believe in a great snake as the progenitor of their tribe. The circles represent water holes and the white dots the eggs from which the people came.



Kangaroo being hunted by a Mimi spirit. Painted by Nguleingulei, Western Arnhem Land, in the "X-ray" style showing internal organs.



These meanings might be revealed only to certain members of a particular community. For example, certain designs may be seen only by men and not women, or only by men of certain categories. Or the meanings of certain designs, or different meanings of some designs, may be revealed only as a person progresses through age-grading rituals, or as his social and ceremonial position in adulthood changes.

Louis Allen refers to "inside" meanings, which are sacred and secret, and "outside" meanings, which can be told to anybody. It is because he was so successful in communicating with old men of the tribes about the different levels of meanings expressed in individual pieces that we have such abundant information about the specimens in the exhibit.

Some art critics have suggested that nonliterate peoples are especially adept at handling and understanding symbolic statements through nonverbal as well as verbal ritual, which sets them apart from the literate world as people who think "mythically." Berndt argues that this is not so. "Our own language and our art," he says, "contain an abundance of symbolic allusions which is part of our traditional heritage as Western Europeans, and this is much the same in Arnhem Land or elsewhere." He says that it is not merely a question of

nonliterate as contrasted with literate. Some people have more, some less symbolic allusions in their art, and the development of scientific precision or growing emphasis on technology has no specific influence one way or the other.

Besides art being a form of intentional internal communication within a society, it may be viewed as a form of unintentional communication about the society as a whole to those outside. Berndt has suggested that because sex differentiation, social and ceremonial status, and prestige are all involved in how the art is produced, used, and understood by different people in Arnhem Land, our studying these contextual contingencies can tell us something about social organization within the society.

Berndt believes we may also be able to learn through the art something about social variations from one region of Arnhem Land to another:

"Art, whether naturalistic or stylized, is always an abstraction from reality—from the empirical situation; it is a statement about something, expressed in a specific way, and the ways of saying it vary as do languages and other aspects of culture generally. But within a particular society, although variation takes place through time as well as through the growth of 'schools,' an art style may provide us,

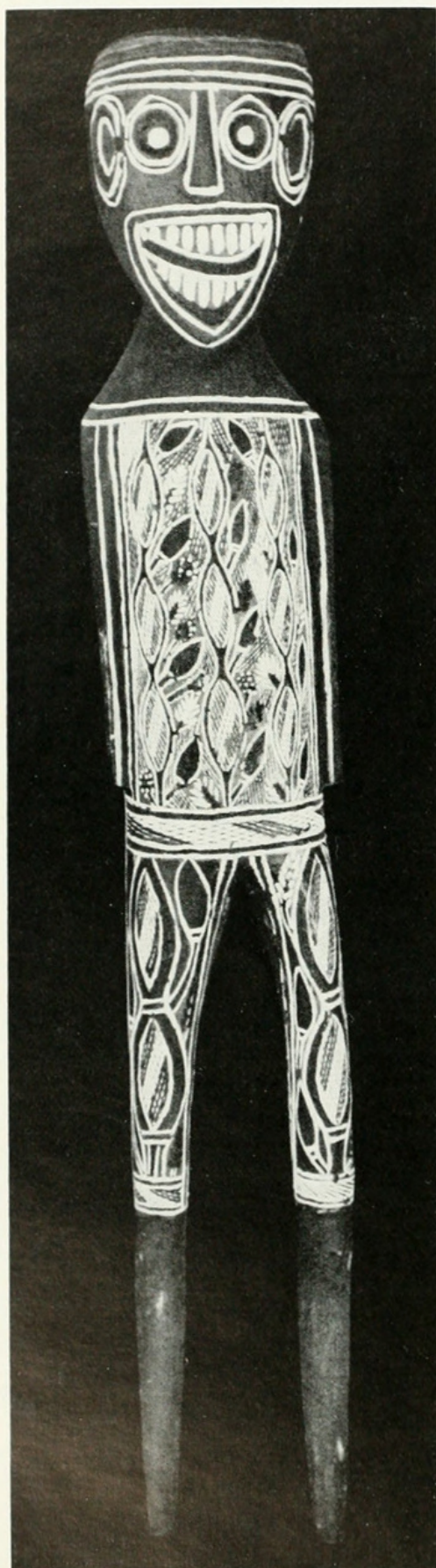
in abstract, with a 'key' to the value orientation."

For example, in considering Arnhem Land bark painting, Berndt points out that the techniques and mediums in one part of Arnhem Land do not differ radically from those in another part, and, with few exceptions, the subject matter does not differ either. But there are noticeable contrasts of style.

The Western Arnhem Land artist usually does not attempt to cover the complete surface with design. His subjects stand out boldly against an open background; and generally he selects fewer features for illustration on any one bark than does his counterpart in the east. He concentrates on the main figure or figures rather than on the setting and subordinates any detail to the main design. The subject matter includes human beings and animals in action. The eye tends to focus on these individual figures, giving an impression of suddenly arrested motion. This tendency, suggests Berndt, has possibly led to an emphasis on relatively naturalistic figures, with a minimum of stylization.

In contrast, the Northeastern Arnhem Land artist usually attempts to cover almost the complete surface of his sheet of bark with design, leaving almost no open space. In the northeast, the main designs receive careful attention, and there is considerable detail, but there is not generally the delicate treatment that is so apparent in the west, and the background is usually filled with crosshatching or crisscrossing of lines. As much as possible is crammed into this background. Again in contrast to the west, there is little in the way of movement or action in design. There is a tendency in the east to repeat both central and subordinate figures, as well as minor motifs, giving the effect of a pattern, such as European-type textile design. Where such figures do stand out from their backgrounds, this is achieved by the use of

A rangga, or sacred carved figure. This one was used in the Djalambo ceremony, one of the cycle of death and burial ceremonies of the Gupupuyngu people, Milingimbi region. Height, 39 inches. Artist unknown.



contrasting colors of outline, or by filling them, whereas in the west both this technique and spatial separation are used.

Naturalism is played down, so to speak, in the east with a corresponding concentration on stylization, and symbolism is expressed in varying degrees of complexity to suit a society that is hierarchically graded in respect to religious knowledge.

Allen suggests that one reason for the development of contrasting styles in the east and west is that the west, especially in the Oenpelli region, is inaccessible to water navigation and thus the art style, which is similar to that found in the cave painting in the area, believed to go back 10,000 years, has remained uninfluenced by foreigners.

Art in the east has been influenced by the Macassans who came regularly from Indonesia in their great praus over the centuries to trade with the Arnhem Landers. The background on the designs in the east, says Allen, is a modification of the Macassan designs, and led to the development of a more detailed style of art.

If Berndt's premise is valid that art style may provide us with a "key" to value orientation, then a study of these contrasting styles of east and west may someday shed some additional light on the relation of the social and cultural situation of the two regions.

But there are some things which are readily apparent about the people from their art. Allen sums it up this way. It tells us three basic things about the people. (1) They have a deep and abiding faith in some supernatural being who created them and this belief is part of their everyday life. (2) Culture heroes taught them the basic rules of living—to be honest, avoid incest, not to steal—and they hold on to these values. (3) It is a stable and workable culture which gives guidance from

generation to generation living in a very severe environment.

In order to provide our Museum visitors with an introduction to the exhibition of art from Arnhem Land, we print excerpts from the comprehensive catalog to be published by the Museum. It was written by Louis Allen, and includes an introduction by Field Museum's curator of primitive art and Melanesian ethnography, Dr. Phillip Lewis, who is in charge of the exhibit.—J. Z.

Arnhem Land has been populated for thousands of years by aboriginal tribes who have preserved their culture relatively unchanged from the Stone Age to modern times. Only in this generation is the transition to a modern, industrialized society being accomplished. There are still alive and active old men who were fully indoctrinated in the ancient traditions and ceremonies and maintain them with some vigor today. From them comes our knowledge of the myths and the significance of the bark paintings, carved figures, and totems.

Although the tribes of Arnhem Land differ in language and local traditions, they share many common cultural traits. The family is the basic living unit; the most important tribal groupings are the clan and moiety. Members of each clan believe they are descended from a common totemic ancestor—a mythical being who assumed animal or human form in the Dreamtime, the time before humans as we know them today appeared. These totemic ancestors created the first people of the clan, together with their songs, dances, and totemic designs.

The clan was the cohesive grouping around which aboriginal family life centered. Each totemic ancestor from whom the people of the clan were descended has its own sacred water hole, where this being lives to this day.

Mortuary rites for Gurrumurringu, the great hunter, painted by Malangi, Manarrngu clan, Dua moiety, Central Arnhem Land. The corpse of Gurrumurringu, in the center, is surrounded by three men who are performing the death rites. The four small figures are performing mortuary rites, which occur about twelve months after the death rites. The small scale of the figures denotes the passage of time. The spirit of Gurrumurringu is recognized as the ancestor spirit of the Manarrngu people. The story of his life and death is sung whenever a member of the clan dies.



To the sacred water hole return the spirits of the dead and from it they are reincarnated by entering a woman's womb. Each clan and its members belong to one of two moieties, the Dua or Jirritja. Each moiety has its own special myths, totems, songs, ceremonies, and even colors and materials. Strict rules apply to relationships between members of the moieties, especially to marriage, which is forbidden within the same moiety.

Each clan has its own territory, which its members rarely leave. The people are intimately familiar with every rock and tree; they know where to dig for tubers and roots, where to find game and water in even the most inhospitable regions. Outstanding features of the terrain, such as odd-shaped rocks, large trees, and water holes, were given names and invested with a personality of their own, for this is where the mythical ancestors had lived or accomplished their exploits in the Dreamtime. Because he believes his own spirit must return to its totemic place within his clan territory, the aborigine finds it difficult to leave his land and unthinkable that he should die elsewhere.

The artists often painted on bark their impressions of the sacred places of the clan; especially their interpretations of the water hole and its surrounding country or the artist's "dreaming" of it. These paintings were displayed and explained to initiates or were made part of ceremonies which centered about the activities of mythical personages at these locations.

Two themes predominated in aboriginal life: the search for food and the observance of religious traditions. From wet season to dry, food was alternately plentiful and scarce. Every able-bodied person, from child to elder, was proficient in searching for edible roots and bulbs and hunting birds and small animals. The older boys and men stalked wallaby and kangaroo.

Religion was not an observance on special occasions, but an integral part of daily life. Like other religions, that of the aborigine was based on a belief in the supernatural. He believed that spirit beings had formed the world, had populated it with living creatures, and had established the rhythm and order of life. These spirit beings had forbidden such acts as theft, incest, and adultery, and these must be avoided or evil would befall the offender. When confronted by forces beyond his understanding and control, the aborigine trusted his spirit ancestors to shelter and protect him.

To the aborigine, the Dreamtime beings were alive and everywhere present. They lived with him now as they had created his forefathers in the beginning. They would reinvigorate his powers when properly invoked and would protect him from his enemies, both mortal and spirit. When they hunted or made love, gave presents or sought revenge, the aborigines were continually aware of the invisible, but to them very real, beings, who commanded the events and who must be both trusted and served.

The styles and designs found in the paintings of Arnhem Land have developed over many centuries. Paintings of totems and sacred objects were first made in the caves and the bark huts during the leisure time of the wet season. The bark sheets forming the ceiling of the hut were painted, the artist lying flat on his back.

The artists of the aboriginal tribes were selected and taught their craft by the old men. Each clan and moiety owned specific myths and designs and these were passed on from one generation to the next by the artist. A remnant of what will probably be the last generation of fully initiated master painters is still alive today. The older men take as apprentices one or more younger men and teach them to paint the secret and sacred designs in the authentic tradition. The apprentices

The creator mother myth painted by Mangrinyin, Gunwinggu tribe. She is shown with her two dilly bags and her digging stick.



inherit the stories and patterns of their mentors, and acquire the right to add increasing detail and significance to their paintings as they complete the proper age-grading ceremonies. The apprentice is limited to two colors at first, but as he advances in tribal stature, he can use all four colors. While the master painter is still alive, the learner is required to paint each design with some distinctive difference, acquiring rights to the full design only upon the master's death.

The aboriginal artist tends to think and talk in terms of separate incidents—the things that happened—and not abstract ideas. His stories, songs, and dances deal with individual occurrences, linked in sequence. His speech is a series of statements, not a flow of narrative. For this reason, his painting also shows a series of incidents, rather than a full story. The bark paintings serve both as history and textbooks. Often the boys who are to be initiated are grouped in a circle around the bark and the story is recounted to them. This is one reason the barks usually can be read from all sides and significant incidents are repeated.

When he paints, the aboriginal artist first thinks out the story he will depict. Often, he selects one part of the myth to be celebrated or one group of totems. He does not sketch or rough-out, but starts at one end or side of the bark and works across, filling in his outlines with patience and deliberation. If his bark is too small to depict the full dimensions of the figure, he will foreshorten or elongate; if a line is not to his liking, he removes the wet ochre with his thumb and wipes it off on a stone. If he wishes to add emphasis, he may repeat the same figure two or even three times. Although he does not set out to create an esthetically pleasing object, the finished product always has harmony and balance; the colors blend; the proportions are pleasing. In this, the aboriginal artist fulfills the basic test of real art: the beauty of his work results from his expression of the meaning of what he wants to convey—not merely from the manipulation of line and color.

The materials used in painting are indigenous to the area. The bark sheets are stripped from a tree, *Eucalyptus tetrodontus*, colloquially named the

Stripping bark.

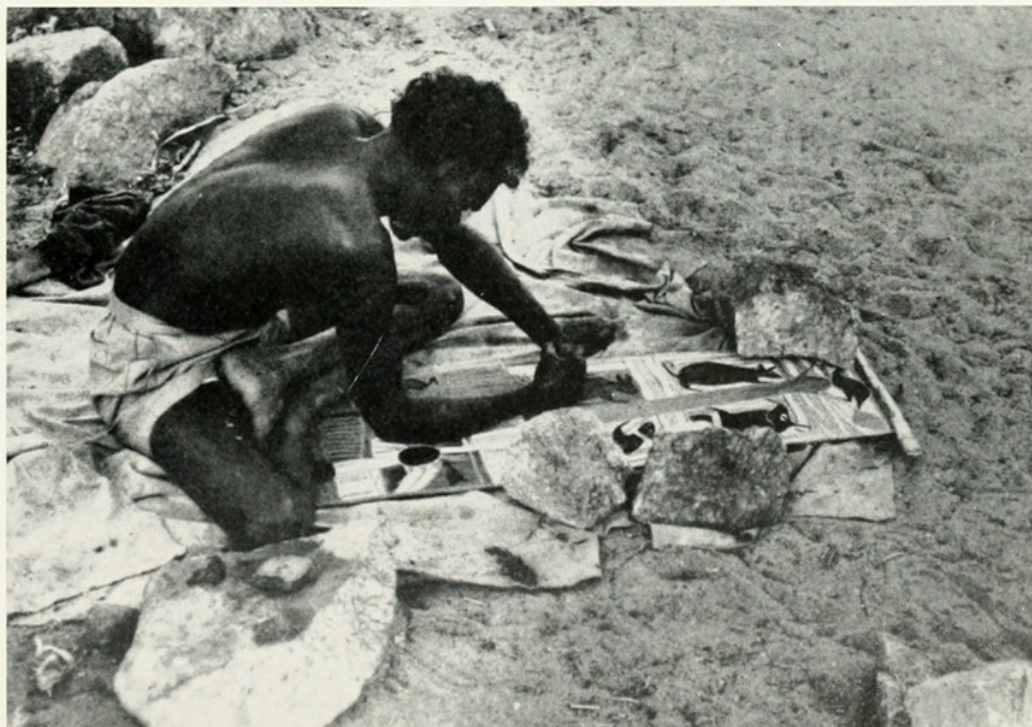


“stringy bark.” The brushes are made from human hair, feathers, or chewed twigs. The paints are mixed on a stone palette with water and a fixative of orchid juice. Four colors are used: white is pipe clay or kaolin; black is made from charcoal or manganese oxide; ochres provide yellow and red. The styles of painting are quite uniform within each geographic region; however, there are stylistic differences among the regions.

To the aborigines, their myths are true and sacred stories which explain their beginnings and their history. The myths tell of the creation of the world and its creatures; the origin of birth and death; how the seasons began and why there are stars and sun and moon. The mythical heroes created all these, together with dances and songs now used in the ceremonies. They decreed how the people must act and the rules they must follow to avoid injury and suffering.

The aborigines believe that the spirits of the Dreamtime must be called upon regularly to renew life and power, to ensure the increase of species, to

Nanyin painting a bark depicting the opossum tree myth.

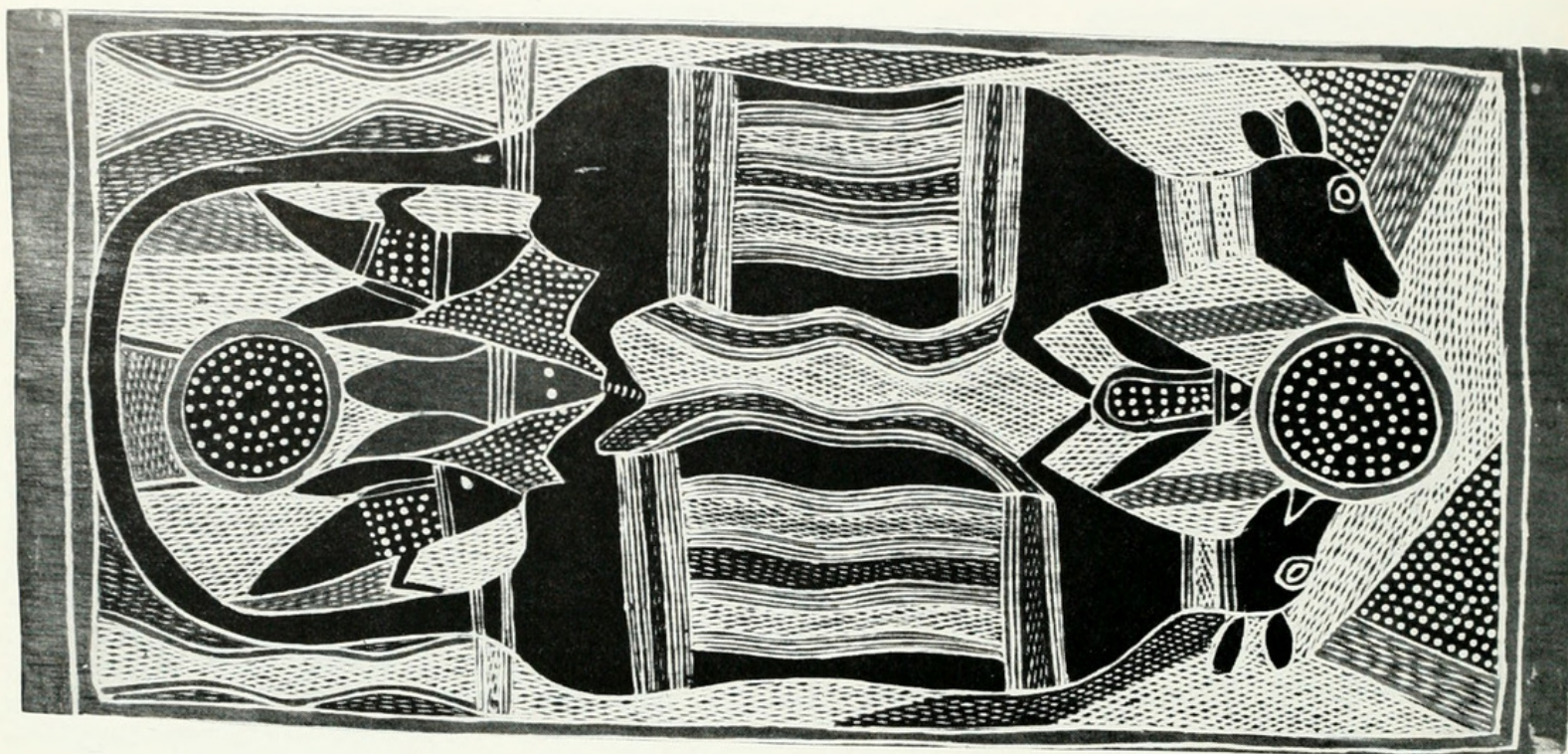


make the women prolific and the children strong. The spirits were invoked in the great ceremonies, such as the Wawilak and Djanggawul. They returned physically—their voices were heard in the didgeridoo, the bull-roarer, and the Ubar drum—so they could protect and aid their people. To gain strength and stature, each man had to learn how to communicate with the spirits and to enlist their support. He acquired this knowledge by passing through the different age-grading ceremonies. He became more powerful as he learned the secret songs and dances and was told the inner meaning of the totems, barks, and sacred places.

Certain myths are found among many of the clans and tribes, while others are localized to specific tribal groups. The two most important myths are the Wawilak and the Djanggawul, which tell of the travels and exploits of Dreamtime personages who created the land and the people.

The aborigines of Arnhem Land believe that the land and the features of the natural environment were created by supernatural totemic

The opossum tree myth painted by Narridjin, Mangalili clan, Northeastern Arnhem Land. The myth tells the story of a lonely bird, Karawak, and how he found his friend, the opossum, to talk to.



ancestors. Prominent landmarks are associated with the great myths; for example, a large boulder may be one of the Dreamtime creatures who was turned to stone; a river was created by a crocodile who chewed his way through a mountain. The stars and constellations were also created by the Dreamtime beings. The moon was once a mythical hero, the Milky Way, a great river in the sky.

The aborigines believe that the wet and dry seasons first began because of the actions of the totemic ancestors, who also created all the animals, birds, and other creatures. In some cases, such as the flying fox and the whale, these creatures were once human; in other instances, such as the goanna and the bush turkey, they existed in their original form, but were named by the creation ancestors.

Since totems are an integral part of the ceremonies and are used in magic and in daily life, the story of the origin and powers of the totems is featured on many of the barks. The totem may be the primary theme—either in a sacred or secular role—or it may be

shown in the background or associated with one of the primary figures of the design. Some totems are shown in a conventionalized manner; for example, a narrow rectangle may represent Yurlunggur, the sacred python. These symbolic representations can be recognized only by the initiated. Most totemic figures, however, can be identified readily.

Each individual and group among the aborigines has its sacred totems, which were created by the ancestors in the Dreamtime and then passed on through the generations. The totem, which may be a living creature, a natural feature, or a special object, has power through its totemic spirit, which is invoked in ceremonies to act as guardian and protector, to increase the food supply, to promote fertility, and for magic. Since they are sacred, the totems are kept secret, and their meanings are progressively revealed during ritual ceremonies.

Each man must learn the complex and secret meanings of the totems and myths as he passes through the age-grading rites, together with the

rules and taboos which relate to daily living. In the process, he acquires the accumulated knowledge of the old men of the tribe, which he, in turn, will pass on. To some degree, the paintings and carvings thus become history books, serving to remind the people of the great events of the past, and to explain birth and death, the changing seasons, and the rules of conduct.

The aborigines remained unmolested for several thousand years. The first visitors were the Bajini, a prehistoric people. Next came the Macassans, who sailed to Australia from the Indonesian islands to the north. They were followed by a scattering of Europeans, then Japanese. Finally, European settlers came with an industrial civilization. Although the initiated aborigine prefers his own land and resists change, some have traveled to the Australian cities. Increasingly, today, the younger people are leaving the reserve, and abandoning the old ways.

Louis A. Allen is a well known collector of Australian aboriginal art. Joyce Zibro is editor of the Field Museum Bulletin.



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