



The Awakening Dream

Seminal Aboriginal Art
From Australia's Far North

Helen Day Art Center

The Awakening Dream

The work presented in this exhibition offers a unique vantage point from which to see the history of Aboriginal Australians. These paintings are the tangible expression of a rich ceremonial and spiritual life that sustained Aboriginal people for countless millennia before European intrusion. They are the living record of a vanishing pre-contact world. The archetypal images on these bark paintings flow from the wellspring of Aboriginal culture known as *The Dreaming*.

The Dreaming is an all embracing framework for living comprised of creation mythology, tribal law, and a resonant and eventful ceremonial life. It is essentially a set of patterns and precedents that were established during the creation period of *Dreamtime* in which the world and creatures in it were still in a malleable state. Ancestor spirit beings, often part animal, part human, formed the physical features of Australia's magnificent and haunting landscape through journeys and subsequent transformational activities. Those journeys often ended when the spirit beings became physically transformed into aspects of the landscape. Today, when visiting the rocky escarpments of Arnhemland with Aboriginal informants, *The Dreaming* can be felt as a palpable presence in the physical world; its manifestations are everywhere.

Not only did these ancestor spirits leave an indelible imprint on the land, but their actions also formed the basis of today's tribal law, setting precedents for social behavior and ritual cooperation as well as forming the subject matter of a rich artistic and ceremonial life. By celebrating the activities of these ancestor spirits, the world's plants, animals, and people are kept in balance. The creation energy that was manifest in activities during *The Dreamtime* is kept alive in the world today and is

harnessed for the good of all living things. If Aboriginal people were to leave their land, it would slowly wither and die without the people's ritual devotion. In tribal Australia, man and the land are inextricably bound to each other.

The designs in these paintings have been handed down

to the artists through a complex system of reciprocal ritual responsibility. The artists have specific ceremonial obligations to tell the stories embodied in these designs so that the continuity of their culture is assured. Despite having the artistic freedom to express individuality in the execution of these works, the artists are obligated to tell specific stories by a form of *Aboriginal copyright law*. It is as if Michelangelo were contractually obligated from birth to paint the *Crucifixion*, but could not infringe on the story of the *Nativity* or the *Annunciation* which was the responsibility of Raphael, and Leonardo held the sole rights to the *Adoration of the Magi*. Through this mosaic of individual responsibility, a larger cultural whole is brought to life and sustained.

The previous thirty years has seen the rude awakening of remaining traditional Aboriginal people from their ancestral world view of *The Dreaming* and its abiding events. For Australia's indigenous peoples, it has been an abrupt transition into the twentieth century. Their art has often served as the focal point of a struggle to hold on to what matters against the relentless onslaught of western time.

The paintings in this exhibition demonstrate the resiliency of the

world's oldest continuous cultural and artistic tradition, a tradition which is evolving to meet contemporary challenges by holding fast to its own sustaining vision of the world.



Dorothy Bennett

The Bark paintings in this exhibition are from various communities in and around Arnhemland, Australia's Aboriginal territory in the tropical North or "top end." Many were produced in the early 1960's by some of the period's most important artists. This was a time when great changes were on the horizon, many of them potentially threatening to the long term cultural survival of Aboriginal culture. The paintings were collected during the post war period by Dorothy Bennett, one of a small group of Australians who realized that the work of Aboriginal artists should be recognized as fine art. Her activities, along with those of many others, helped to reposition Aboriginal art as the statement of a vital living culture with a great deal to contribute to contemporary Australian society.

Bennett had traveled repeatedly to Arnhemland during the 1950's as part of expeditions mounted by others. In the early 1960's, she struck out on her own. With her dog as a

companion, she drove, in a retrofitted station wagon, to visit remote Aboriginal communities where art was produced. A good portion of what she collected found its way to Australia's fine museums which were in the process of developing their own collections of Aboriginal art. Her adventurous spirit and dedication to the Aborigines was a major factor in ensuring the preservation of traditional Aboriginal culture.

Her expeditions were underwritten by Ted Barnett who met Dorothy at an exhibition of Aboriginal art in Melbourne in 1962. At that meeting, Dorothy's strong conviction that Aboriginal art was worth preserving, persuaded Ted to take a leap of faith. This exhibition is the result of their vision.

The collection now belongs to Adi Barnett who presented it to the public for the first time at Helen Day Art Center, Stowe, Vermont.

The Evolution of Bark Painting

Forty thousand years of Aboriginal art is permanently recorded on the rock faces and cave walls in and around Arnhemland. Bark painting was practiced alongside the tradition of rock art, often using the same imagery. However, early bark paintings were executed on the inside of bark shelters used during the rainy season. At the end of the season, the shelters were allowed to go back to nature.

The paintings were not intended to be utilitarian art objects, but rather were produced to create a special ritual atmosphere linking the community to the higher spiritual realm.

It was not long before our culture saw bark painting as an art form which should be preserved, and for the first time,

Aboriginal people were encouraged by missionaries and anthropologists to produce art for the outside world - hence, a new hybrid art form was born. This art served as a permanent record of Aboriginal culture as well as a means of earning a livelihood. At the turn of the century, anthro-

pologist Baldwin Spencer commissioned a number of bark paintings at Oenpelli. Today, these earliest barks are found in many Australian museums.

The making of a bark painting is a long drawn-out natural process. The bark is stripped off the stringy-bark Eucalyptus tree at certain times of the year when it becomes loose. It is then dried, flattened by various means and stripped of

its outer layer; the smooth inner surface is then prepared for painting. Paint can be applied with anything - a chewed stick, a human hair brush, a delicate reed. Today, commercially produced brushes are often used. The sophisticated crosshatching technique known as *Raark* requires great delicacy of execution.



The paints used are all natural earth pigments. The reds, yellows and browns are ochres, or naturally occurring iron oxides. The white is from kaolin clay, the same clay from which porcelain is made. The black comes from charcoal or, in some instances, manganese.

The Plates



Plate 1: **Sacred Bullroarer Design.**

Artist: unknown. Area: Port Keats

The design on this bark represents the Corroboree, or ceremonial dancing ground, and billabongs, or sacred water holes. In Port Keats to the west of Arnhemland proper, artists began reproducing, on oval shaped barks, designs found on sacred objects such as the bullroarer. The bullroarer is a small oval board which, when attached to a piece of string and swung around the head, makes an eerie sound. According to Murrin-Patha mythology, during *The Dreamtime*, a birdman named Garraphon made a bullroarer and inscribed on it a series of patterns. He called together all of his friends and each danced his own special dance. Garraphon whirled his bullroarer around his head and it flew into the creek. Today, bullroarers are used in ceremonies in which young men are initiated into the rites of the Corroboree. A number of bullroarers are made, each one inscribed with a pattern of a dance performed at Garraphon's ceremony. The young men sit in a ring and observe the "boss man" and his aides who sing and dance the story of Garraphon and other birds.

Plate 2: **Namarrkon The Lightning Man.**

Artist: Nym. Area: Oenpelli, Western Arnhemland, c. 1960.

This is a figure typical of Western Arnhemland where the richness of local rock art is paralleled by the imagery reproduced on bark paintings. The lightning man is generally depicted with, on his elbows and knees, stone axes which he crashes together to make thunder and lightning and bring torrential floods. He represents the destructive power of nature. Often a ring of lightning runs from his head around to his testicles, drawing a parallel between sexual tension and a brewing storm.





Plate 3: **Sacred Crayfish and Fish**

Artist: Dula. Area: East Arnhemland, C. 1960.

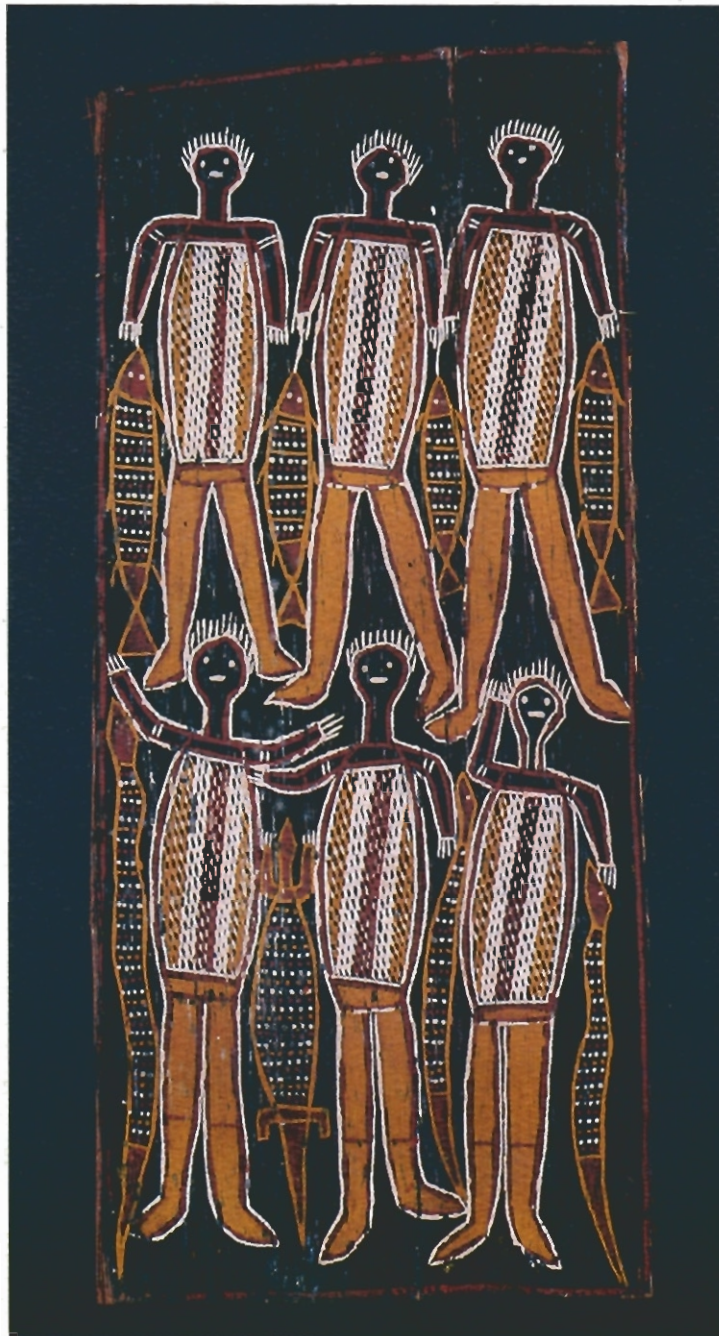
In the *Dreamtime* ancestral lawgivers showed local tribes a style of painting and decreed that they paint in that style. This bark painting shows the style of Eastern Arnhemland and is characterized by black silhouettes outlined against a background of vibrant crosshatching.

Plate 4: **Waterbird Dance.**

Artist: David Malangi. Area: Milingimbi, Central Arnhemland, c. 1960.

This design is associated with a dance related to mortuary rites, during which clan members gather around a sacred well and perform dances of various totems, one of which is the waterbird. Clan wells eventually became home to spirits of the dead. The sacred well is shown in the center of the painting with fish and webbed foot marks of the birds. The track to the well showing webbed feet is made of dirt, but the one with crosshatching leading away from the well is covered with grass. Dots represent bubbles in the water. David Malangi is perhaps the most celebrated living bark painter, and his works are exhibited in major Australian museums.





HELEN DAY
ART CENTER

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