



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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RESEARCH REPORT....

DRAWINGS OF TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL CHILDREN:
THE EFFECTS OF EUROPEAN CONTACT*

Mrs. R. Lendon,
2 Aldridge Street,
Alice Springs, N.T.

In the last issue, Dr. Collins and Mr. Fielding discussed the art education of fringe-dwelling Aboriginal children. Here, Mrs. Lendon provides insights into the art of a group of traditionally oriented children and assesses the impact that the European culture has had on their artistic expression.

In her letter, Mrs. Lendon particularly mentioned that she should be pleased to hear from any readers who have noticed interesting features in the art of rural or urban Aboriginal children.

THE COLLECTION OF DRAWINGS IN 1940

This study really began in July 1940 when Dr. C.P. Mountford made an expedition to Central Australia to collect anthropological information from the Aboriginal people there. He was - and still is - particularly interested in the myths of the tribal people. During this particular journey, he spent a month at Ernabella, a small Presbyterian Mission about two hundred miles southwest of Alice Springs. The Aboriginals there belonged to the Pitjantjatjara tribe and Mountford was well known to them; they had named him a member of their Honey Ant Totem, which placed him in a special kin relationship with all the Aboriginals at Ernabella.

The Mission was in its infancy when Mountford arrived. The school had been open for four months, but with virtually no equipment. There must have been some writing materials, since there are reports of a child writing a letter to a pen friend in Victoria after four months at school, but Mountford maintains that no formal art teaching at all had been given to the children.

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*I should like to express my gratitude to Professor Gavin Seagrim for his stimulating interest and support throughout this study.

During the month he was at Ernabella, Mountford spent an hour each day in the school, collecting drawings from the children. It is his unique collection of drawings - a record of the first attempts of children aged four to fifteen to draw on paper - that form the basis for this comparative study.

The drawings were made on brown paper with coloured lumba crayons. The children were instructed through an interpreter to draw a picture of anything they wished. A Pitjantjatjara interpreter also translated any explanations the children gave of their pictures.

TRADITIONAL ART FORMS - SACRED DESIGNS

In 1940 the idea of drawing on paper was new to the children - the medium was a new, European one - but they were by no means new to art itself. Art played then, and continues to play, a vital part in the lives of the Ernabella people. I mean literally 'vital', since it is by the drawing of special designs accompanied by chanting that the people believe that the continuation of their lives and of all the natural phenomena around them will be assured. The children who drew Mountford's pictures would almost certainly have had designs painted on their bodies already at some time in their lives, perhaps to help them grow or at the time of a corroboree. However they could never have seen the most sacred designs of the tribe.



The picture above is an example of a simple design which might be made on the ground or on a sacred object. This particular one came from the Pintupi tribe who live north of the Pitjantjatjara, but the form of the Pitjantjatjara design is similar. There are relatively few motifs in the designs, perhaps 8 -12, and they are combined in different ways with different meanings attached to them.

The sacred designs have to be reproduced in exactly the same way every time they are made. In fact, if rain does not fall after the performance of a rain-bringing ceremony, the people start accusing each other of not doing things quite as they had

been done in the past. All the heavy rain we have been having in the Centre this year came because old William Bigfoot sang for rain - and he remembers the old ways very accurately!

ROCK DRAWINGS

However, not all Pitjantjatjara art is made under such strict controls. The Paintings made on rock shelters are often not part of the ceremonial life and they show a variety of animals, birds, trees and tracks. Rock paintings are made with red and yellow ochre, white pipe clay and charcoal which are applied to the rock surface by means of a piece of frayed stick or a finger. Children would be allowed to see many of these drawings and might participate in making some of them.



SAND DRAWINGS.

However, the drawings with which the children would have had most experience are Sand Drawings, 'milpatjunanyi'. It is common to see small groups of women and children sitting in a circle, whilst one of them smooths the sand and makes marks in it during the telling of a story. The marks are signs, rather than pictures, since without a verbal explanation their meaning is unclear. The sand drawings that I have watched have been mainly about usual daily events - sleeping, fighting, hunting, travelling.

Here are some examples of the signs used in sand drawings by Warlbiri people who live north of the Pitjantjatjara and further east than the Pintupi.



man
spear
fighting stick



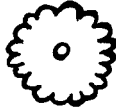
wiltja
(living shelter)



man sitting or
woman sitting



women round a stick
or tree on a hill

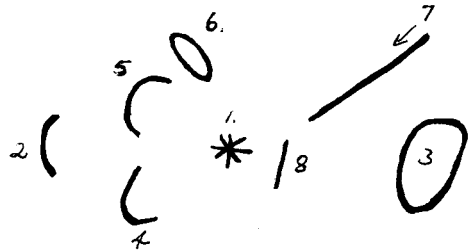


trees round a
water hole

Part of a sand story might progress like this:

Patch of sand smoothed out

1. 'Fire'
2. 'One tree'
3. 'Little hill'
4. 'One woman sitting'
5. 'One woman sitting'
6. 'One woman has baby'
7. 'Man comes'
(Man's track obliterated)
8. 'Man sleeping'
9. 'Women stand up'
(indicated with fingers)
10. 'They go hunting'



Marks made in sand
with elegant hand
movements. The
numbers indicate their
sequence and are made
at the same time as
the words of
corresponding numbers.

Sand smoothed out, marks obliterated

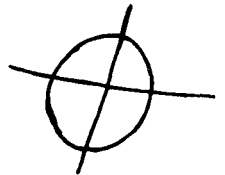
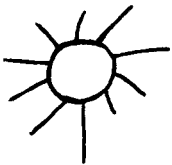
The stage is set again with new marks showing the location of the women and of the food that they find. The story may go on for some time, a sequence of activities being mapped out on the sand with an accompanying description made in a quiet, chanting voice.

For the first four years of their lives, children have frequent experiences of their mother's sand stories and by about age seven young girls are telling their own stories to other children. Neither boys nor men tell sand stories to each other in this way, although they do sometimes make marks in the sand to demonstrate the relative location of things.

The actual signs used in sand stories are the same as the ones used in sacred designs. It is the special meaning attached to certain combinations of signs that sets them apart in the eyes of the people. For instance, the Pintupi design on page 40 might be a sacred design representing two great ancestral beings with a dead kangaroo between them. In that case it would have a double meaning, also representing parts of the real topography where the ancestors allegedly did their sitting. However, the picture might be part of a woman's sand story showing a man and a woman sitting each side of a baby in a coolamon. We have no way of telling the design's true meaning without the interpretation of the person drawing it.

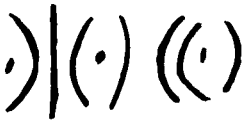
THE 1940 DRAWINGS

The 1940 collection of drawings shows examples of art forms which Kellogg has found in young children's drawings all over the world. She claims that children make these forms, not because they are trying to portray anything they see, but because of an innate tendency to draw in a certain way, which follows a universal developmental sequence. Some examples are:

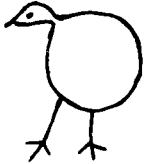


The reasons why children make these forms are not fully understood. It may be that there are physical constraints which limit children's hand and arm movements to certain paths, or that there are intrinsic properties of the nervous system which predispose children to respond visually to certain patterns and to repeat them selectively. Kellogg's claim that there are early drawing stages which are common to all children is supported by the results of this study.

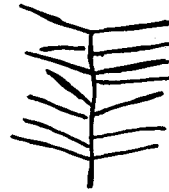
The 1940 drawings contain some graphic signs which occur in sand drawings to this day, such as:



and some that are like traditional rock drawings, such as:

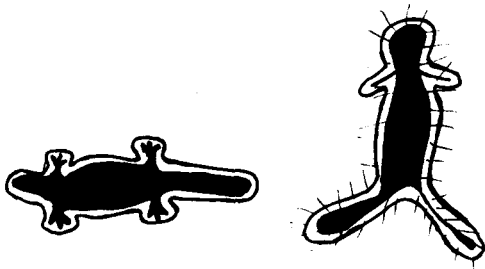


Emu



Tree

That is, in 1940 the children drew on paper in their traditional sand and rock art forms; the subject matter was mainly a diversity of animals, vegetation and topography, with the addition of some recent European innovations, such as sheep and water melons. Few human figures were drawn. The perspective was also traditional; hills and water holes were drawn in plan view, as were small animals like goannas, whereas upright objects, such as emus and trees were drawn in elevation. In many pictures the objects were spread all over the paper in apparently unrelated ways, like the rock drawings. Sometimes an outer line in contrasting colour was made round discrete objects. For example:

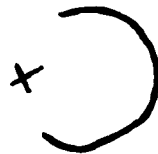
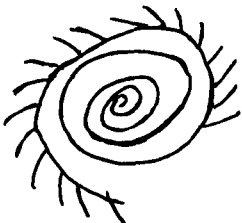


The function of the outer line is puzzling. It could be purely for decorative purposes.

THE 1972 COLLECTION OF DRAWINGS

In order to determine the ways in which Ernabella children's drawings have changed since 1940, in 1972 I collected a new set of drawings from the school children, using the same instructions and materials as Mountford had done thirty-two years earlier. During the intervening years, the children have had almost daily access to pencils, paper, books, films and other European school materials. Many of them have been to towns like Alice Springs and the older ones speak English as well as Pitjantjatjara.

The pre-school is today being run entirely by Aboriginal women, generally the mothers of the young children who attend. Here are some examples of drawings made in 1972 by pre-school children aged three to five years.



Their drawings bear a strong resemblance to the young children's drawings in 1940.

While I was watching a group of these young children sitting round on the floor, I noticed one mother hold her child's hand and guide it round the shape of the conventional 'wiltja', much as I have seen the Europeans do when their children are learning to write letters.

It is my view that, in a purely Aboriginal context, children imitate or are taught at a young age the conventional ways of portraying objects. In fact, the conventional graphic representations are, in some cases, the very ones that Kellogg describes as being universal in young children's drawings, such as:



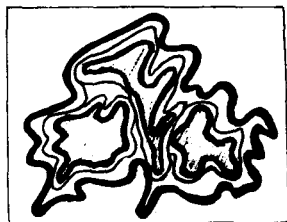
It seems to me that when an Aboriginal child makes these forms, it is impossible to determine whether he is doing it because of

his own innate (and universal) tendencies or because he has been taught or imitated traditional graphic signs which also take that form. It could be that the traditional signs evolved and were preserved in response to the same innate preferences that children express for balance, symmetry and simplicity. In any case, the children under five do not appear to be attempting to draw the world as they see it with their own eyes. This is in contrast to the older children, the ones who are taught by European teachers. Their drawings in 1972 strongly resemble ones made by European children in Alice Springs in terms of realism and perspective.

The subject matter drawn by the five to nine year olds shows a variety of scenes involving birds, animals, people (stick figures), windmills, hills, clouds and rain. Children older than that (aged nine to fifteen) draw less varied pictures: all the boys drew landscapes with distant hills and sometimes a waterhole, a bore, some trees, or a road disappearing into the hills.



The girls drew similar landscapes which, amongst girls over twelve, gave way to stylized flower patterns of Ernabella 'squiggles'.



COMPARISON OF 1940 AND 1972 ERNABELLA DRAWINGS

The way that the children draw trees has altered: from  in 1940, to  in 1972. Other changes also show a development from  stylistic to realistic art, akin to the changes that occur in the stages of art of European children. I think that the new 'realistic' trees are a new convention, rather

than a new representation of reality by each child individually. Alice Springs and Ernabella children both draw branches of a tree in the same way, but at one time I found that all the Ernabella children were representing the foliage by vertical lines, whilst the Alice Springs ones were using horizontal ones. I interpreted this as being merely a difference in convention.



There are two important differences between all the drawings done in 1940 and those done by children older than six in 1972. The first is in the organization of the whole picture - the objects are drawn in a definite relationship to one another in 1972 rather than being spread all over the paper. The second is in the orientation of the picture, especially the hills. We now see the country from the side, Namatjira-style, rather than from above.

I have three suggestions for the reasons why this change in orientation has occurred. The first, the most obvious one, is that the children's frequent contact with European drawings has caused them to imitate the white man's way of drawing in school situations. A second is that a drawing in elevation is a style highly suited to a drawing viewed from one side as most European drawings are, whilst sand drawings were looked at by people sitting in a circle on the ground when a plan drawing gives every observer a similar viewpoint. Thirdly, a bird's eye view is ideal for illustrating the positions of people and places in relation to each other, which is very important in traditional but not in school drawings.

COMPARISON OF ABORIGINAL AND EUROPEAN CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS IN 1972

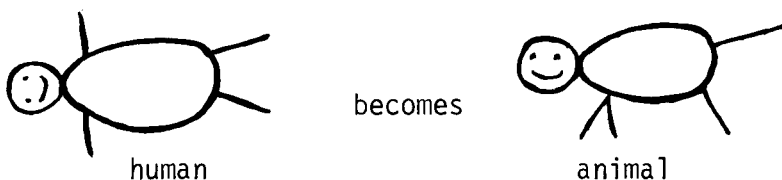
The Ernabella children have not changed completely during the past thirty years to an art form which is indistinguishable from that of Europeans. The Ernabella 'squiggle patterns' that occupy the days of the women in the Craft Shop are apparent in the children's drawings, particularly those of the older girls. Some draw 'pure' squiggles and some draw hills that have a strong squiggle look about them.



Traditional graphic signs still occur in the children's pictures, for example fire * and spear → .

And in comparison with children's drawings from a primary school in Alice Springs, the drawings on the whole are more boldly drawn and in brighter colours. Human figures in 'stick', rather than solid, form to be more common at Ernabella.

Another point I have noticed is that young European children tend to give their animals human faces, often with smiles - a phenomenon I have not found in 1940 or 1972 Ernabella drawings. Perhaps it is the anthropomorphism with which we Europeans regard our animals, the way the dog and cat are part of the family and the story books refer to 'Mr. and Mrs. Kangaroo', that leads our children to draw human-like animals. Kellogg had an aetiological explanation for the existence of human-like animal forms. She maintains that human figures evolve first in children's drawings and become modified into animals, only gradually losing their human features. For example:



Young Aboriginal children at Ernabella do not draw as many human figures as European children. Their animal drawings may evolve from a different earlier form. In the 1940 drawings, the stockman's horses bear strong resemblances to kangaroos.

There has been very little done on Aboriginal children's drawings - though there are detailed records of some of the sacred designs of the adults. The only large study has been

made by John Morley, now of the College for Aboriginal Education in Adelaide. He collected over one thousand, five hundred free drawings from full and part-Aboriginals and Europeans attending schools in South Australia and the Northern Territory. His main aim was to see whether a free drawing assessment was a fairer way of judging the 'educability' of Aboriginals than the conventional I.Q. methods used by schools at the moment. He looked at forty-six aspects of their drawings, (aspects such as depth perspective, use of colour, size of human figure) and found that all three groups of children passed through the same stages of development in the portrayal of these aspects. There were differences in the degree to which they were in evidence - for instance, the full bloods tended to use depth perspective at a younger age than the others, the Europeans drew larger human figures at age six to seven (soon after school entry), but there were no major distinguishing factors between races that were apparent at all ages.

Ernabella crayon drawings at this point in time have some distinctive characteristics, such as the shape of the hills and the prevalence of 'squiggles'. However, it seems likely that the isolation of the place and the short period of European influence are the causes of this, and that in the future their drawings will become indistinguishable from European children's drawings.

There are no indications that sand drawing is dying out; and sacred drawings will continue to be made as long as the Aboriginal people live on their own lands and their social structure remains intact. It is my belief that whilst the people are surrounded by sand and rocks, they will continue to use their traditional graphic signs and pictures in those media, whereas in a European context the children have come to use European art forms.

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REPORT ON

THE COGNITION SYMPOSIUM AT THE BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
OF THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL STUDIES
CANBERRA - MAY, 1974.

Betty H. Watts,
Reader in Education,
University of Queensland

The Cognition Seminar was held over two days in Canberra, May 27th. and May 28th.

A wide range of papers was presented by Australian psychologists. Also we were fortunate to have the stimulation of a number of overseas speakers.

The overseas visitors who are well known in studies involving various minority groups were Professor R.W. Brislin and Professor T. Ciborowski from the East-West Centre at Hawaii, Professor H.C. Triandis from the University of Illinois, U.S.A., Professor U. Pareek from India and Professor L.W. Doob from Yale University.

Teachers will, I think, be interested to see the variety of issues that were discussed at the two-day symposium. The program for the two days indicates this diversity