



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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AIMS AND ACTIVITIES

OF THE ABORIGINAL ARTS BOARD*

We thought readers would be interested in the following account of the activities and aims of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council

The unique character of the Aboriginal Arts Board is perhaps typified by the remote places in which it may have to meet, such as Laura, north-west of Cooktown, Queensland. Members had to swim the Laura River to their rendezvous in a great rock cave, an Aboriginal gallery rich in paintings.

Aboriginals come from many places to attend the open sessions of Board meetings. A great deal of debate in such sessions is devoted to Aboriginal culture and the practicalities of the arts.

The Board aims to revive, strengthen and encourage practice of the traditional arts and to stimulate a renaissance. Where tribally-oriented people believe their traditions are not under threat, they cope better with the complex problems of their changing life-style. And in cities and towns Aboriginals who are several generations removed from their traditional culture derive purpose, pride and identity from the existence of the traditional arts as part of a living culture.

However, Aboriginal culture remains under threat. The old men are the keepers of tradition, the influence of European education and customs having undermined the traditional learning system. The task of checking these trends is enormous, but much can be done, and has been done.

Unquestionably, the future of Aboriginal culture largely depends on the interest of young people which appears to be strong.

An illustration of young Aboriginals' interest in the culture of their people is the publication of *The Aboriginal Children's History of Australia*, by Island Heritage Limited of Hawaii, Rigby Ltd, and the Board. The book was three years in the making. The Board

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invited Aboriginal children to submit stories and paintings for the history and the response was remarkable in numbers and quality. The cover of this Review was made from one of the submissions. The history is a best-seller.

The Board assisted schools directed by Aboriginals and supported by communities in which traditional skills and cultural appreciation are taught. On Mornington Island, for example, the emphasis given to teaching traditional language, crafts, bushcraft, music, song-and-dance and story telling, matches that placed on formal schooling.

The Board established a literature working party to consider the Board's assistance to Aboriginal writers, including a possible Aboriginal Writer's Award. There is already a body of work by Aboriginal writers and considerable interest by publishers in their work. Among titles of books produced by Aboriginals with Board assistance, were *If Everyone Cared*, by Margaret Tucker (Ure Smith); *Wacvie*, by Faith Bandler, (Rigby); *Kwork Kwork the Green Frog and Other Tales from the Spirit Time*, a collection made from the excess material from *The Aboriginal Children's History*, with additional illustrations by Ralph Gumudul of Goulburn Island (ANU Press); *Karobran*, by Monica Clare (Alternative Book Publishing Co-op).

Meanjin devoted a whole issue, assisted by the Board, to Aboriginal literature and to discussion of Aboriginals' artistic aims and achievements. Among the contributors were Kath Walker, Bobbi Sykes, Gerald Bostock, Colin Johnson, Aileen Corpus, and Les A. Murray. In this issue the Editor pointed out that "Aboriginals" is the plural form preferred by them, not "Aborigines".

A series of art exhibitions was inaugurated by the Board, mostly with assistance from Commonwealth or State bodies or private enterprise.

.. An exhibition of paintings from the Western Desert: First opened at the Australian National University in 1975, this exhibition has been shown widely, is booked out to mid-1979 and has attracted much interest and favourable comment. The Peter Stuyvesant Cultural Trust and the Board funded this exhibition.

.. A major exhibition, organised by the Board and the Australian Gallery Directors' Council, of bark paintings from Oenpelli, in western Arnhem Land. This opened at the Western Australian Art Gallery in October 1977 and will tour capital cities and regional centres for the next two years. The exhibition is of significance because

the life style of the Oenpelli people is threatened by the development of uranium deposits.

.. An exhibition of Aboriginal art sent to Lagos, Nigeria, for the Second Black and African Festival of Art and Culture. After touring Africa and Egypt this exhibition is again in Lagos for permanent display.

.. An exhibition of Aboriginal arts and crafts from Central Australia and north-east Arnhem Land: Opened in December 1977 at the Australian Museum this was designed to create a broad awareness of the Aboriginal Homelands Movement. Government assistance and income from art and craft work has enabled large numbers of Aboriginals to establish independent settlements known as Homeland Centres where, tribal elders believe, unrest and dissension among the young caught up in cultural conflict in the larger settlements may be reduced. The Homelands Movement is a statement from Aboriginals that they are determined to assert their right to maintain their own culture in their own land. The exhibition will travel during 1978/79.

.. Several exhibitions of Aboriginal art displayed at the 1978 Adelaide Festival including a collection of Tiwi carvings and Western Desert paintings at the Jam Factory; *Paint: An Exhibition of Aboriginal Art and Decoration* at the South Australian Museum; two selling exhibitions mounted by Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd - paintings from Yirrkala, with artists from both communities present.

An extensive exhibition is being mounted in Edmonton, Alberta, in answer to a request from the Commonwealth Games Canada (1978) Foundation and as part of the Australian participation in the Games. An Aboriginal artist was featured in the Commonwealth Print Portfolio event organised by the Foundation.

Within the past few months the Tiwi people of Bathurst Island accepted plans and a contract has been let for the building of a Keeping Place and cultural centre. Sydney architect, Peter Myers, drew the plans in consultation with artists and craftsmen of the island. The project has been undertaken with the assistance of the Department of Construction and funded by the Department of Environment, Housing and Community Development and the Aborigines' Benefits Trust Fund. The Board which is co-ordinator of the undertaking believes the Keeping Place will draw attention to efforts to preserve the cultural awareness of the Tiwi people which has been deteriorating rapidly.

The design is based on the traditional bark shelter with a

display room, a principal gallery, and work and storage areas for the Tiwi collection, documenting Bathurst Island's history since the mid-19th century.

The Board has continued to administer several arts-related programs formerly administered by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. It has assumed responsibility for Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd, a national marketing company which has helped many Aboriginal artists through a dramatic increase in art sales. Sales in 1976/77 rose by about 60 percent to \$507,624; in 1977/78 sales were more than \$850,000. The Board expects higher figures in future.

The Board has contributed significantly to the company's policy and works with the staff in co-ordinating company purchasing with the Board's own commissioning program. Strong working relationships have been established between the company and their community art and craft associations which are supported by the Board.

With assistance from the Professional Musicians Union of Western Australia, the Third National Aboriginal Country Music Festival was held in Perth during Easter 1978. Previous National Festivals were held in Canberra. The Board decided that to encourage wider participation and promote the talents of Aboriginals, future festivals should be rotated between capital cities. Over 5,000 people - mostly Aboriginals - attended the Perth Festival, the biggest gathering of Aboriginals for a cultural event in the recent history of Western Australia. Contestants came from all over Australia - Melbourne, Albury (NSW), Warburton (Western Desert, W.A.), Broome (Western Australia), Warrabri (Northern Territory), Adelaide and Alice Springs.

As a lead-up to the Festival, the Board supported State festivals in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Winners of State concerts were sponsored to participate in the National Festival. It is estimated that over 20,000 Aboriginals attended or participated in Board-assisted festivals during the year. As a result of the Board's promotion of Aboriginal country music events, many competing artists have been engaged as professional musicians.

It is vital that Aboriginal artists and craftsmen, especially in tribal areas, should be able to earn a living from their art. This aids the survival of the traditional skills, and provides a stable base from which emanate a host of cultural and educative pursuits.

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