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THE ARTISTS AND THEIR WORK*

No one knows when or where Aboriginal painting began. There is some agreement that the Australian Aborigines came from a Veddoid ancestry originating in South India and Ceylon. Since the term *Vedda* is derived from the Sanskrit *Vyadha*, meaning a hunter or one who lives from the chase, we can assume that this also was originally a hunting culture. There is evidence that these hunters made paintings in caves, using ashes and turmeric mixed with spittle, possibly to bring success to their hunting. We can only conjecture, with no factual evidence, that the earliest migrants to Australia have brought this custom with them.

The Arnhem Land bark paintings evolved from pictures of fish, animals and people which the first inhabitants appear to have made in caves and rock shelters. We can assume that these designs of kangaroos, fish, and thin, sticklike spirits called Mimi were drawn for the same purposes as today: to depict the totemic ancestors so their help and support could more readily be invoked, to encourage game to reproduce and increase, to make magic, and to depict the limits or characteristics of the "country" owned by a clan.

Today some of the Arnhem Land clanspeople credit their painting skill and the designs that they use to mythical ancestors. In western Arnhem Land, for example, the Gunwinggu tell of the master painter whose non-sacred name is Marwai, and who travelled about the country carrying his paints in a dilly bag hung from his neck. During his wanderings, he camped at cave sites on whose walls he drew many of the important designs that are still used. Marwai taught the tribesmen how to paint the sacred totemic figures. Today the highest compliment for a painter of the regions is to be told, "You paint like Marwai."

The custom of painting is commonplace among the Aborigines, and the designs have many uses. Sacred designs are painted on the bodies of men preparing for initiation and participating in age-grading and other ceremonies. Bodies of deceased kin are similarly decorated to prepare them for final rites. The designs also are used in sympathetic magic: if a figure in a painting is depicted spearing a kangaroo or enjoying intercourse, a similar event can be made to occur by chanting the appropriate charms over the painting.

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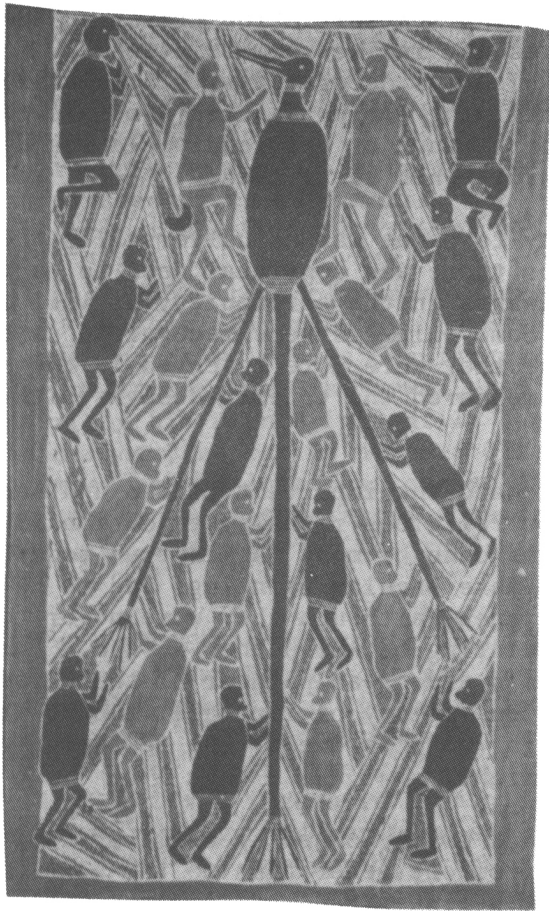
The paintings have traditionally served as history books and religious texts, to instruct young men in the myths and accompanying rituals as they prepared for circumcision and age-grading rites. Often the painting was laid on the ground, the initiates clustering around while one of the old men explained each detail. This custom explains why some of the paintings seem to have neither a top nor a bottom but can be read from all sides.

Paintings served other practical functions in Aboriginal life. At times they were used on message sticks or boards. When a man journeyed to a distant clan, he was frequently asked to carry messages for friends and relatives. To help him remember, he painted or carved a series of symbols on a piece of wood or bark. When he delivered the message, he "read" the stick or bark. A young person preparing for initiation travelled to other locations to notify relatives and invite them to attend. On occasion he carried a message board which was decorated with a painting of his clan totem. This identifying emblem assured him safe passage across the territories of strange or unfriendly clans and served as an invitation to kinfolk when he arrived.

The ability to paint was as universal as the ability to hunt or track, for there was continual need to paint designs on the bodies of participants in the ceremonies, as well as on bark and other surfaces. Some painters were recognized as better than others not because they were more talented in the aesthetic sense but because they rendered the totemic designs with greater precision and fidelity.

Since men owned the important totems and had primary responsibility for religious rituals, traditionally most of the sacred painting was done by men. As is true today, however, women were permitted to make secular paintings and to help fill in the designs of sacred ones, although they were never told the inner meanings of the painting on which they worked. For example, Marwulan, an old man and great painter of the Riradjingu clan, *Dangu* linguistic group, *dua* moiety of Yirrkala, taught his daughter, Bangul, to help him. She is one of the few women painters recognized in her own right.

Each clan and moiety owned specific myths and designs that were passed down from one generation to the next. Every man owned a few designs that he inherited and were his exclusive property. He could obtain the right to paint other designs only by permission of their owners. Use of a design without permission invited trouble;



The Sea Gull Dance

*One of the few paintings by a woman artist.
Depicts a ceremonial dance.*

in the old days such thefts prompted many spearings. As they passed through the age-grading rites, men progressively acquired full rights to the designs. Every father and his brothers, who were classificatory fathers, had both the right and the duty to transmit their esoteric knowledge to younger members of their lineage. Whatever their chronological age, fully initiated men were known as old men. Each elder took on one or more learners, whom he taught to paint the designs in the sacred tradition. However, learners were never forced; they were taught to paint only after they showed their interest. As the neophytes completed each stage of the age-grading rituals, they learned more of the inner, hidden meanings of the sacred designs, and progressively acquired the right to add increasing detail to their paintings.

In some clans the learner was limited at first to two colours, but as he advanced in tribal stature he was permitted to use all four colours of the Aboriginal palette. One reason for this restriction was that some colours, such as yellow ochre, were sacred. The deposits of yellow ochre had been laid down in the Dreamtime by one of the mythical heroes in places that could be visited only by initiated men who had the sole right to paint with the colour. The right was conferred when the individual had passed the appropriate age-grading ritual.

While the old man was still alive, the learner was required to paint each design with some distinctive difference, acquiring rights to the full design upon the master's death. Often the master painted the outline and the learner filled in the detail. Sometimes only a few years separated a master from his apprentice; in other cases there was a wide disparity. For example, Nanjin of the Manggalilji clan was only four years older than Naridjin, whom he taught to paint. On the other hand, Djunmal of the Liagalawumiri clan, was separated by some thirty-four years from Bandarawui, who learned from him.

The bark to be used for painting is taken from the stringy-bark eucalyptus after the wet season has set in and the free-running sap makes it easy to loosen the bark. After the outer bark is removed, the sheet is heated in a hot fire to make it pliable, then it is worked vigorously back and forth to straighten the curved surface. Finally it is held down by heavy rocks to cool and set into a fairly flat plane. When the painter is ready to begin, he coats the bark with a background colour, generally brown or black. Sap from the tubers or stems of the *Cymbidium* orchid is rubbed into the paints. This acts as a fixative, holding the paints, which otherwise quickly flake off. Egg yolk and honey also are used as

fixatives. Brushes are made by chewing the end of a twig to form a suitable tuft or by fastening hair to a sliver of wood. The primary figures are outlined, most often, in white, and the detail filled in patiently and deliberately. However, I have seen artists start at one end of the bark and work across, completing the design without outline and fully from memory.

Since every line and dot of a bark painting carries a traditional meaning, innovation is rare. Nevertheless, painters do develop distinctive styles. Bininjuwi, an outstanding Milingimbi artist, of the Djambarbingu clan, has a notably precise and beautifully balanced style. Malangi, also from Milingimbi, of the Urgiganjdjar clan, has a freer and more flowing, but equally harmonious approach. Today even the older painters are beginning to use commercial brushes rather than the traditional chewed twig. The result is a more delicate touch, with finer lines and more detail, and yet, overall, a distinctly "Europeanized" look.

The paintings may depict a single figure, or they may illustrate one or a series of incidents. But they rarely present a complete story. The reason for this is that Aborigines tend to think and talk in terms of separate incidents - things that actually happened - and not abstract ideas. Their stories, songs, and dances represent individual events linked sequentially. Their speech is a series of statements, not a flow of narrative.

Work done for religious ritual is the finest of which an Aborigine is capable, for he believes the spirit of the totemic ancestor will enter into the painting during the forthcoming ceremony. When the singing and dancing are over, the spirit will depart. Thereafter, the work is considered merely a piece of painted bark that may be thrown into a waterhole, abandoned or, nowadays, sold.

Certain conventions hold in the composition of the work. First, although the Aboriginal painter does not render planes to express the idea of linear perspective, he does indicate spatial relationships by size, showing nearby figures on a larger scale than figures meant to be farther away. For example, a large fish and a smaller one depicted on the same plane indicate that the one is swimming on the surface of the pool, the other in its depths. Distortion of scale to signify importance is another typical convention. Accordingly, the size of one figure in relationship to others in a group may be completely at odds with nature because the artist is stressing its primacy. Repetition is also a common device to indicate importance or degree of sacredness: a waterhole

repeated several times indicates it is an object of veneration. Colour is used symbolically in Aboriginal art. Depending on the context, white may stand for death or semen, red for blood or lightning, and black for storm or rain. Some conventions serve a purely practical function. If an artist's bark is too small to depict the full dimensions of a figure, he will foreshorten it or, perhaps, elongate one section. The long neck of an emu may be bent to accommodate its placement at one end of the bark; the tail of a stingray may curve to follow the border of the painting.

The Aboriginal artist works slowly and methodically. If a line is not to his liking, he removes the wet paint at once with his thumb, which he wipes off on his thigh or on a stone. Although the painter does not set out to create an aesthetically pleasing object, the finished composition always has harmony and balance; the colours blend, the proportions are pleasing. In this, the Aboriginal fulfills what I believe to be the basic test of real art. The work is beautiful, not in line and colour alone, but because it perfectly expresses the artist's intended meaning.

