

ART  
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# MOUNTFORD GIFTS

WORK FROM THE AMERICAN-AUSTRALIAN  
SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION TO ARNHEM LAND 1948



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### WORK MAKING HISTORY

Art from the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL)

During the dry season of 1948 the artists and communities of Umbakumba, Yirrkala, Milingimbi and Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) of Arnhem Land were involved in one of Australia's most important research projects. These communities, although considered remote, are, by nature, cosmopolitan. Countless generations of Arnhem Landers have engaged with each other through cross-cultural exchange and major creation ceremonies, such as the celebrated Djang'kawu and Wagilag Sisters narratives. The region has conducted business with its international neighbours, the Macassans from what is now eastern Indonesia, since the 1500s and more recently has weathered the invasion and upheaval caused by the establishment of Palmerston (later renamed Darwin) in the 1860s.

The communities were formed under the Northern Territory Aboriginals Act 1910 in an effort to control the Aboriginal population. Milingimbi was established in 1923 by the Methodist Overseas Mission for the local Gupapuyngu and Djambarpuyngu people. The Methodists set up another mission in 1958 at Umbakumba, Ayangkulyumuda (Groote Eylandt), for the Warnindilyakwa people. In 1925 the Church Mission Society formed a mission for the local Kunwinjku people, and their neighbours, at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) on an old pastoral lease. Ten years later, the society established the mission at Yirrkala for the extended Yolngu community in that region. These communities are the sites at which the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) conducted its field work. Expedition leader and instigator Charles Percy Mountford (1890–1976) nominated each community because of its regional distinctiveness, both cultural and environmental. The regions continue to be recognised for their distinctive styles and cultural practices.

Mountford initiated this major expedition while on his successful 1944–45 lecture tour of the United States of America with the then Commonwealth Department of Information. The AASEAL project, collectively sponsored by the American National Geographic Society, Washington's Smithsonian Institute and the Australian Government, was one of a range of Australian–American relationship-building exercises that have shaped, and continue to shape, Australia. These major programs, triggered by the end of World War II, were politically inspired to consolidate the new-found alliance shared by Australia and the US. The expedition reflected this partnership with four of its 16 members being American, including archaeologist Frank M Setzler, ornithologist Herbert G Deignan, mammalogist David H Johnson and ichthyologist Robert R Miller. The team also included ethnologists, photographers, filmmakers, nutritional scientists, a botanist and support staff.

The expedition experienced a slow start in Arnhem Land, due to a late wet season which hindered communication and transport. These were problems that were to dog the entire trip. The group established their first camp on 14 April 1948 at Umbakumba on the eastern coast of Ayangkulyumuda, remaining there until 8 July. From this base, the AASEAL team was able to visit the entire island and take a number of field trips to the surrounding smaller islands, including Bickerton, Winchelsea and Chasm. At Chasm Island, Mountford excitedly retraced the steps of English explorer Matthew Flinders, who in 1803 made what is believed to be the earliest documentation of Aboriginal rock art. Flinders later described the art form as 'rude drawings'.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the expedition's initial delays, a journey to another camp, at Roper River, was abandoned, affording the members an extended period on Ayangkulyumuda. They then travelled to Yirrkala, arriving on 9 July and staying for one month. Mountford described Yirrkala as 'by far the most pleasant of all our camps' with a 'curving beach, on which the waves thundered day and night, and behind us a fresh-water swamp, shaded by large trees, fringed with luxuriant grasses'.<sup>2</sup> This idyllic setting was used as a base for members of the expedition, some of whom flew to Milingimbi and travelled to what they cited as Jelangbara (Yalangbara) on Port Bradshaw, homeland of the Marika family and the Djang'kawu creation site. The final camp was made at Gunbalanya, or Oenpelli as it was then known, from mid September to 2 November. Apart from the town's oppressive heat, the camp was acclaimed as 'the most spectacular' and 'the most

productive'. The drying flood plane offered countless fish; the grass and woodland were home to numerous birds; and the rock escarpment contained expansive art galleries.

At each camp, research was carried out in 'earnest': expedition members conducted medical examinations, opened nutritional camps, captured birds, animals and fish, excavated grave sites, documented rock art, recorded cultural activity and commissioned artworks. Mountford declared that the 'results of the expedition could not have been richer' with the 'gross results':

13,500 plant specimens, 330,000 fish, 850 birds, 460 animals, several thousand aboriginal [sic] implements and weapons, together with photographs and drawings of a large number of cave paintings ... a collection of several hundred aboriginal [sic] bark paintings and two hundred string figures. In addition to the physical collections of natural history and ethnological specimens, each scientist had written extensive field notes as a basis for his scientific papers. There were also many hundred of monochrome and coloured photographs as well as several miles of colour film on aboriginal [sic] life and natural history.<sup>3</sup>

The AASEAL project was Australia's largest international expedition, and attracted enormous attention. The vast collection was distributed between Australia and the USA, with the artworks divided between the Commonwealth of Australia and the Smithsonian Institute, Washington. Some 275 artworks remained in Australia and, at the Queensland National Art Gallery in 1956, were distributed amongst the state galleries and museums. As the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists were not represented in many of the galleries' art collections, these historic gifts were unprecedented. The artworks collected by the expedition have formed the core of many contemporary collections of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander art, including that of the Art Gallery of NSW. The placement of Indigenous artwork, such as the bark paintings collected in Arnhem Land, within a gallery context, rather than that of a museum, was ground-breaking.

The Art Gallery of NSW received 24 artworks from the expedition: eight bark paintings and 16 works on paper. Under the stewardship of the then deputy director, Tony Tuckson, and within the framework set by the AASEAL gifts, the Gallery pioneered the way in recognising Indigenous art within the context of contemporary culture. These 'gifts' stimulated the major collecting expeditions of Tuckson and Dr Stuart Scougall, which resulted in the commissioning of the famed Tutini (Pukumani graveposts) from Melville Island and the epic Yirrkala bark paintings from 1959.

The expertise of Mountford himself sat uncomfortably between art and anthropology. His unorthodox approach set new standards, such as the artists' free choice of subject.

[The] method which I adopted was to ask the men to make bark paintings for me, seldom suggesting a subject. At the end of each day, the artists brought their work to my tent, related the associated myth, and explained the meanings of the designs.<sup>4</sup>

Mountford had no formal training in anthropology and was considered by most to be an amateur ethnographer. He had a number of critics, many of whom questioned the validity of his position as expedition leader, and he was often faulted for his research. Expedition anthropologist Frederick D McCarthy reported that at

... dusk or thereabouts he [Mountford] got them [the Aboriginal artists] together near his tent ... and hammered the interpretation out of them, sometimes in a friendly way, at others [in a] bullying style. He's partly deaf and his recordings of native words must be very inaccurate. His data is not the product of spontaneous work on the part of the native but has been got from a short-term 'pounding' of the informants.<sup>5</sup>

After the expedition, a book titled *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land* was published with four volumes on art, myth and symbolism; anthropology and nutrition; botany and plant ecology; and natural history and zoology. Again, Mountford received harsh reviews by establishment anthropologists who questioned his research, arguing that Indigenous cultural production could neither be enjoyed, nor exist, without rigorous ethnographic study. Respected anthropologist Ronald Berndt stated,

Apart from the acknowledged value of this book in making available to us a great number of illustrations relating to Arnhem Land artistic productions (and to the layman this may well override all other considerations), it has little to commend it. The discussion is not 'scientific' nor anthropological, and the descriptive procedure used throughout the volume is far from satisfactory. As far as the study of Australia Aboriginal art and mythology is concerned it is retrogressive.<sup>6</sup>

Rejected by the establishment, Mountford's research was accessible to various fields of study, including a wider general readership, essentially freeing the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander artists from ethnographic constraints. The promotion of Aboriginal art and culture was furthered in other Mountford publications, including *The art of Albert Namatjira* (1944) which promoted the cultural understanding of Namatjira's work and directly influenced the artist's popularity. Some, such as *Australian Aboriginal portraits* (1967) and *The Aborigines and their country* (1969), served as coffee-table books that, for their simplicity, offered a unique and personal insight into the communities Mountford visited. A popular collaboration with artist Ainslie Roberts in the books *The Dreamtime* (1965), *The dawn of time* (1969) and *The first sunrise* (1971) saw (unattributed) Aboriginal creation narratives introduced to mainstream Australian literature. These works, along with Mountford's films and photographs, contributed to the promotion of Aboriginal culture at a time when Aboriginality was officially being assimilated and disenfranchised. However, within an art history framework, Mountford's failure to recognise and acknowledge individual artists in relation to their artworks and his omission of personal biographies for these artists represents a significant gap in research. As a result, the works of art collected during the expedition sadly carry no attribution – the artists and their works are denied an identity. Within the context of the Art Gallery of NSW collection, the AASEAL works are distinguished by their historical value and artistic vision and active participation; and for the role they played, and still play, in communicating cultural ideas to a wider audience.

The Gallery collection includes seven stunning bark paintings from Ayangkulyumuda. These paintings are dominated by their iconic black backgrounds, a colour created by the locally abundant magnesium. Floating figures are formed with a filigree of delicate red, yellow and white dashes, dots and lines; the effect is of an intricate lace-work. Reminiscent of the local rock art, figurative elements (and less frequently, abstracted figures) sit comfortably within the space of the bark, as seen in *Dinungkwulanguwa* (dugongs), where mother and calf are floating, suspended in a magnesium sea.

As an island nation, many of the works from Ayangkulyumuda are seascapes, and depictions of *dinungkwulanguwa* dominate the Art Gallery of NSW's set. Mountford commented on the seemingly secular subjects, 'the flesh of which [dugongs] is a favourite food of the Aboriginal people. The conventionalised designs on the body represent the skin markings of the animal.'<sup>7</sup> Conversely, other works, including *Dumabiyandangwa* (kestrel) and *Yinikaburra* (scrub fowl), carry sacred meanings, as transcribed by Mountford. His research relates these artworks to important creation sites on the island, where an imposing pillar of rocks signals *Dumabiyandangwa*'s roost, and a cherished waterhole retains the memory of *Yinikaburra*'s nest.

The works collected from Yirrkala, Milingimbi and Gunbalanya were all made on card, which Mountford had taken with him as an alternative support given the difficulty of collecting bark during the dry season in Arnhem Land. This shift demonstrates Mountford's somewhat liberal ideology, where the image, not material 'authenticity', was paramount. It also demonstrates the artists' creative ability to successfully incorporate new materials into their genre. Today, the use of card and paper continues across Arnhem Land, most predominantly in Gunbalanya. The imagery of the AASEAL works from Yirrkala, like contemporary bark paintings, often fill the card or acknowledge the edges of the material with a border, as seen in *Macassans collecting trepang*, *The kangaroo man and the cockroach* and *Bayini, men and women of Port Bradshaw*. These images collectively tell of different eras in Yolngu life: *The kangaroo man and the cockroach* describes the creation of the great Arafura Swamp in east Arnhem Land by Borok who left her four coolamons of fresh water unattended in a fit of rage; the documentation of visitors to the region is represented in the paintings, *Bayini, men and women of Port Bradshaw* and *Macassans collecting trepang*, symbolising the harmony in which the two groups lived, worked and traded in Yolngu country; and contemporary culture is celebrated in the work *Bunungu Bunumbirr ceremony*.

Many of the subjects represented in the artworks collected by the expedition remain central to contemporary Arnhem Land art. The paintings collected at Milingimbi, namely *Dhuwa journey of the dead – Aboriginal heaven* and *The wild honey, koko – hive of wild honey*, are precursors to subjects addressed today. The iconic morning star pole, as is seen in 'Aboriginal heaven', and the abstract koko, or honey design, continue to be celebrated today in painting, sculpture and song. The same can be said of the works from Gunbalanya, which feature iconic images of mimih who reside in the surrounding rock country. These lyrical beings are caught in communication in *Mimih man and woman*, while the excitement and activity of community mimih life is seen in *Mimih family*. Typifying Gunbalanya imagery, these paintings highlight the community's strong rock art tradition – a tradition that, decades before, captured the attention of anthropologist Baldwin Spencer. Spencer commissioned the translation of rock art onto the portable surface of bark in 1912. Floating figures and forms, as if lifted from the rock art wall, provide the subjects of the paintings collected by Mountford's 1948 expedition. In the work titled *Division of fish* we are reminded of a statement by Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek (born c1926), one of Arnhem Land's leading contemporary artists. He described the role of art and imagery in education, stating that parents 'would be asked by their children to paint illustrations of stories or animals. The children would say, "Paint it for me!" Parents wanted to explain things to their children.'<sup>8</sup> *Division of fish* illustrates the potential of art for the dual purpose of education and inspiration.

The ongoing currency of the AASEAL collection has led to a number of important re-readings of the research, in particular regarding the expedition's more questionable omissions and activities. As a result, a number of works have been attributed and the artist's individual hand has been recognised and acclaimed, including the work of both Binyinyuwuy (1928–1982) and Jabarrgwa Wurrabadalumba (1896–c1969). Concurrently, a long and emotional process towards the repatriation of ancestral remains has also begun. In 2008 Indigenous elders travelled to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington to collect the remains of 33 people whose graves were robbed during the expedition. These remains represent two-thirds of the total stolen. The institution, acting against the wishes of the elders, has retained a group of remains including a collection of skulls.<sup>9</sup>

More than half a century since their creation, the significance of the works in the AASEAL collection remains undiluted, as evidenced by their repatriation to the communities who created them and their maintenance by these communities and the host institutions. Due to the enormous efforts of the artists, and the researchers who facilitated their creativity, the impact of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land in educating and engaging new audiences is immeasurable. The works of art that comprise the proceeds of this historic expedition generated an enormous shift in the cultural landscape of Australia, claiming new territory for generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and, literally, making history. They truly are a gift to all Australians.

### Jonathan Jones

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#### Notes

- 1 Quoted in Klaus Toft, *The navigators: the great race between Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin for the north-south passage through Australia*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney 2002, pp 209–10
- 2 Charles P Mountford (ed), *Records of the American–Australian scientific expedition to Arnhem Land*, vol 1: art, myth and symbolism, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1956, p XXV
- 3 Mountford 1956, p
- 4 Mountford 1956, p 13
- 5 McCarthy to Ronald Berndt, 4 Nov 1957, McCarthy Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney, quoted in Michael Davis, *Writing heritage: the depiction of Indigenous heritage in European–Australian writings*, Australian Scholarly Publishing and National Museum of Australia Press, Melbourne 2007, p 206
- 6 R M Berndt, 'The Mountford volume on Arnhem Land art, myth and symbolism: a critical review', *Mankind*, vol 5, no 6, Oct 1958, p 249, quoted in Davis 2007, pp 209–10
- 7 Mountford 1956, p 67
- 8 Hetti Perkins (ed), *Crossing country: the alchemy of western Arnhem Land art*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney 2004, p 97
- 9 Zoie Jones, 'US urged to return Indigenous remains', ABC News, [www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/08/27/2347753.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/08/27/2347753.htm) (accessed March 2009)



ARTIST UNKNOWN  
Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), Arnhem region  
Mimih man and woman 1948  
natural pigments on paper  
Gift of the Commonwealth Government 1956 9274



ARTIST UNKNOWN  
Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), Arnhem region  
Division of fish 1948  
natural pigments on paper  
Gift of the Commonwealth Government 1956 9282