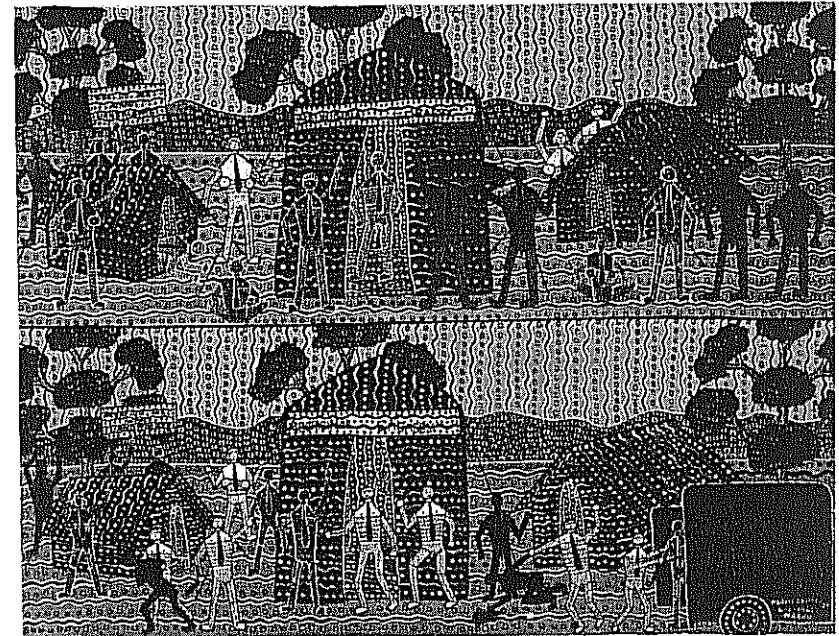


In considering Aboriginal art it is important to be sensitive to the subtle relationship between past and present. The concept of the Dreaming, a uniquely Aboriginal way of placing people in time and space, forces one to think differently, and in a less linear way, about the relationship between creativity and form in art. At the same time, Aboriginal art has become known worldwide through the process of European colonialism, and the last two hundred years of colonial history have had an immense impact on Aboriginal society. The general theme of this book, if a single theme can be condensed from the many different pathways that are explored, is that the recent history of Aboriginal art has been a dialogue with colonial history, in which what came before – an Aboriginal history of Australia with its emphasis on affective social and spiritual relationships to the land – is continually asserting itself over what exists in the present. Aboriginal people are continually trying to insert, as precedents for action, values and beliefs about the world that have their genesis in pre-colonial times. Aboriginal engagement with history has not been backward looking, however; rather it has been designed to influence the course of future events while at the same time acknowledging change. Aboriginal art is itself dynamic and changing, responsive to new circumstances and challenges, influenced as well as influential. Robert Campbell junior's *Aboriginal Embassy* (1), for example, illustrates a representational style he developed which, though it shows many influences, does not fit neatly into any pre-existing category. The tent embassy was an integral part of the campaign for the recognition of Aboriginal land rights, and has become an important symbol of Aboriginal presence at the heart of Australian society and a reminder of the issue of sovereignty. The boundaries between Aboriginal art and non-Aboriginal art become blurred as Aboriginal art becomes part of contemporary world art.

For 40,000 years or more, before European colonization began in earnest in 1788. Australia had been a continent of hunters and

gatherers. Although they were by no means isolated from the rest of the world, Aborigines had nonetheless been able to maintain a distinctive way of life that centred on enduring, religiously sanctioned relationships between people and land. The form of the landscape was created by the actions of mythical ancestral beings who continue to be a powerful spiritual force today. Works of art – paintings, sculptures, songs and dances – which commemorated the actions of the ancestral beings were inherited by the human groups who took over from them. Art established a line of connection with the foundational events and enabled people to maintain contact with the spiritual dimension of

1
Robert
Campbell
junior,
*Aboriginal
Embassy*,
1986.
Acrylic on
canvas;
88 × 107.3 cm,
34 1/2 × 43 1/4 in.
National Gallery
of Australia,
Canberra



existence. Art provides a sacred charter to the land and producing art is one of the conditions of existence. It keeps the past alive and maintains its relevance to the present.

Aboriginal art is also part of a system of restricted knowledge in which members of society maintain control over certain forms and their significance. Art is sometimes restricted on the basis of age or gender, certain ritual contexts being only for men and others for women. The basis of this restriction may be to protect other members of society

from spiritual danger or to protect the rights and interests of those belonging to certain categories or groups. This is reflected in the fact that rights to produce paintings are often vested in particular people. However, it would be quite wrong to overemphasize the secrecy of Aboriginal art. Most Aboriginal art forms can occur in public contexts and in general the issue is more one of maintaining control over the art than maintaining secrecy.

Aboriginal people lived, and in parts of Australia still live, for much of the year in small groups of kin, coming together at times of abundance for large ceremonial gatherings. In the well-watered riverine and coastal areas of Australia the Aboriginal population was quite dense and people lived semi-sedentary lives for most of the year, exploiting seasonally abundant resources. In the more marginal desert areas the population was lower and people had to travel more widely to gain a living from the land. Aboriginal people speak over two hundred different languages and each language often contains a number of different dialects. The people are divided up into groups – clans and moieties, sections and subsections – which vary in detail across the continent. Everywhere kinship is important in establishing relationships with people, and to land and sacred property. In many parts of Australia art is the property of groups, and rights in such things as paintings are carefully guarded and restricted. That has not meant that Aboriginal art has remained static over time. Indeed, Aboriginal art is characterized by its regional diversity and the range of different forms associated with particular places. Yet, despite regional variations, across Australia people are linked together in a network of connection. Art plays an important role in marking the relationships between groups and expressing identity. In the post-colonial context its mediating role has, if anything, increased in significance.

The complex recent colonial history of Australia combined with regional variation in art styles has resulted in the great diversity of contemporary Aboriginal art. The slow passage of the colonial frontier across northern Australia meant that the Aboriginal communities of much of Arnhem Land and central Australia came under effective colonial rule only between 1930 and 1950, just about the time that Aboriginal art was

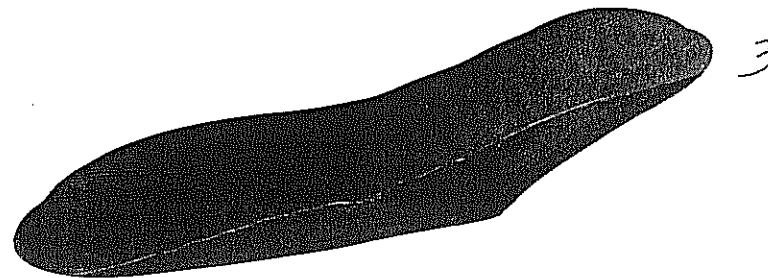
2
gaining recognition. Elsewhere in Australia, from coastal Queensland across to the Perth region of Western Australia, the frontier had moved rapidly in the first half of the nineteenth century and Aboriginal populations had been destroyed, their land taken away from them and the process of cultural transmission rudely interrupted. The finely incised weapons of New South Wales and Victoria were recognized as art by Europeans long after the Aboriginal people had ceased to make them and the ritual life that was the context for so much artistic expression had been cruelly disrupted. The Aboriginal people in these regions did not cease to produce art nor to exist in historical continuity with their pasts. But their artistic and cultural practices diverged more from 'pre-contact' forms and shared more in common with the practices of their European neighbours than was the case further north. It would, however, be quite wrong to divide Aboriginal art into two mutually exclusive categories according to the nature of its colonial history.

Divisions that have been proposed between 'tribal' and 'urban', 'classical' and 'modern', 'traditional' and 'non-traditional', pose more problems than they help solve. Aboriginal people from Arnhem Land have been influenced by the presence of urban Darwin and many have lived there on and off ever since the township was established, even though they may have retained their own distinctive languages and cultural practices. There is nothing about being an urban dweller that in itself defines a person's artistic practice. In particular cases there will be demonstrable relationships between the environment in which someone lives and other aspects of their life, for example exposure to different influences and pressures, and different educational opportunities – but urban is too general a term. The term classical is similarly problematic. While it is intended to signify styles of art that exist in continuity with those existing at the time of European contact, it can result in an overemphasis on continuities of form. There is evidence of major changes in art styles before European contact, and post-contact regional art forms have maintained their dynamism as much in Arnhem Land and central Australia as in the southeast. The major problem with any dual division is that it simplifies the variety and internal dynamism of Aboriginal art and threatens to impose rigid external categories which constrain the development of the art and define its authenticity.

This book is ordered thematically rather than as a regional survey, partly because colonial history has made regional comparison difficult, partly because the same set of themes is relevant in different ways to understanding Aboriginal art across Australia. While our knowledge of the religious significance of Aboriginal art and the closeness of its relationship to land and social group is more comprehensive from the more recently colonized areas of northern and central Australia, the art of nineteenth-century southeast Australia was clearly integrated within society on a similar basis. Likewise, the process of European colonization has had an impact on all Aboriginal Australians, and with hindsight it is possible to see Aboriginal people throughout Australia developing similar strategies from the very beginning to try to come to terms with the invasion of their land and resist European domination either through force or persuasion. In each chapter I have taken examples that illustrate my argument, but I have also shown, where relevant, how the theme can be applied elsewhere in Australia.

This book covers painting, sculpture, weapons and a variety of other art forms. It concentrates on painting and two-dimensional works, reflecting the fact that painting on bark, rock surface and the human body is perhaps the major medium of expression. The more rare free-standing three-dimensional sculptures covered include figurative sculptures from Aurukun, the toas from the Lake Eyre region and the mortuary sculptures from Arnhem Land and Melville and Bathurst Islands. Also discussed are sculptures on the ground made from sand or earth, often incorporating complex constructions of branches, sticks and string, which were much more common and probably occurred throughout Australia. Indeed, if a broad definition of art is adopted, most of the techniques and raw materials used to make material culture objects could be used to produce art objects. Almost every artefact from string bags to weapons could occur in decorative forms. Aesthetic factors undoubtedly played a role in making the fluted and ochred artefacts of central Australia (2). Bodily ornaments made of seeds, feathers and shells, fixed with beeswax, ironwood resin or spinifex gum, suspended or woven into fibre string forms, occurred in abundance. Design in Aboriginal Australia cuts across particular media and it is possible to extend much of what is learnt about paintings to

2
Pitchi, used as
a baby-carrier
and food bowl,
Kimberley
region,
collected c.1896.
Wood and
pigment;
l.107 cm, 42 in.
Pitt Rivers
Museum,
University
of Oxford



other art forms. Designs are an inheritance from the ancestral past, and producing an artwork often involves fitting the design to the shape of the surface or nature of the space available as well as taking advantage of the particular properties of the medium concerned.

Australia can be divided into a number of geographical regions that reflect broad variations in the cultural and artistic systems of their Aboriginal populations (see map on pp.432-3). Although I have been conscious of the need to illustrate the regional variety of Aboriginal art, I have been equally concerned to allow the reader to gain some knowledge in depth of particular regional styles and even the range of work of individual artists. The south and southeast region, stretching from Adelaide in the south to Brisbane in the east, was the first part colonized by Europeans and knowledge of the art is less detailed than elsewhere. Nevertheless, the region does seem to have considerable unity, in particular in the widespread tradition of finely engraved and incised wooden artefacts.

The central region, stretching from Tennant Creek in the north to the Flinders Range in the south and from inland Queensland in the east across to the coast of Western Australia, is an arid zone with low population densities and considerable cultural continuities. Although it is possible to identify sub-regions associated with the better-watered region around Alice Springs and the interrelated linguistic groups of the Lake Eyre region, drawing rigid boundaries only results in oversimplification, masking both regional similarities and local differences.

Across the northern coastal region of Australia and the adjacent inland regions, where there is greater linguistic variation and where art styles can differ markedly in adjacent areas, it is possible to define a number

of more precisely demarcated regions. In the west are the Kimberleys, characterized by the Wandjina paintings (see 9), then follows Western Arnhem Land with its x-ray paintings (see 32), bordering on Eastern Arnhem Land with its intricate clan designs, and then on the eastern side of the Gulf of Carpentaria is Cape York Peninsula with its distinctive art forms showing some continuities with the Torres Strait Islands. However, again within each region there is considerable variation and in some cases, such as Melville and Bathurst Islands, and Groote Eylandt, sub-regions exist that have very distinctive art styles of their own.

Although there are enormous differences between art in different parts of Australia, there are also common factors in the position of Aborigines in Australian society and the way in which they have been incorporated in the Australian state that have influenced developments in Aboriginal art across the country. Differences between Aboriginal art traditions and differences between the works of individual artists need to be acknowledged. The particular form of artworks depends on a wide range of factors, including the historical position of the artist, the intellectual and aesthetic inheritance and the role that art has in society. Aboriginal art history is no different in these respects from any other art history. The struggle for the recognition of Aboriginal art has been partly about definition, about the right to be defined in terms of its own history rather than according to Western preconceptions.

