

Article

Indigenous Agency in Australian Bark Painting

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Abstract: In the early years of the discovery of Indigenous bark paintings in Australia, anthropologists regarded this artform as part of a static and unchanging tradition. Inspired by the images of Arnhem Land rock art and ceremonial body design, the bark paintings were innovatively adapted by Indigenous Australians for the bark medium. Today, this art is recognised for its dynamism and sophistication, offering a window into how the artists engaged with the world. Within the context of recent art and anthropological scholarship, the paintings are understood as artefacts of Indigenous ‘agency’. They are products of the intentional action of artists through which power is enacted and from which change has followed. This paper reveals how the paintings were influential to their audiences and the discourses arising from their display through the agency of the artists who made them, and the curators who selected them. It underlines how Indigenous agency associated with the aesthetic and semantics values of bark painting has been and continues to be a powerful mechanism for instigating cultural, social, economic and political change. As such, it points to the wealth of Indigenous agency yet to be documented in the other collections of bark painting that are held in institutions in Australia and throughout the world.

Keywords: Indigenous art; bark painting; Indigenous agency; agency; Aboriginal art; National Museum of Australia; Australian art collections; Helen Groger-Wurm; Karel Kupka; Dreaming



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1. Introduction

Indigenous Australian bark paintings draw from one of the world’s oldest continuous art traditions. The world’s largest and most historic collection of barks is that of the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra.¹ Assembled from many different collectors, the traditional knowledge encoded within the barks of the collection represents an Indigenous cultural resource of enormous significance. It is not only important to the First Nations peoples of Australia, but to the Australian nation and global cultural heritage.²

From 1912³ onwards, bark paintings were collected by visitors to their places of production in tropical northern Australia. They were regarded by some anthropologists as static and unchanging. Today, however, bark paintings are acknowledged for their dynamism and sophistication,⁴ providing a window into the history of how the artists have engaged with the world. Within the context of recent art and anthropological scholarship, the paintings are understood as artefacts of Indigenous ‘agency’. They are products of the intentional action of artists through which power is enacted and from which change has followed (Appadurai 1986).⁵

1.1. Agency—An Overview

People, of all cultures, perceive and experience things/objects as having ‘agency’ and the capacity to change or influence the world.⁶ This is explained as being due to human projections and the imagination’s role in thinking, i.e., humans think through the process of image making. Anthropologist Alfred Gell theorised that the artist is the primary agent. The art object, however, is the secondary agent with functional impacts that play out in a range of complex cultural, social, economic and political contexts (Gell 1998,

pp. ix–xi). With reference to Yolngu culture in northeast Arnhem Land, anthropologist Howard Morphy drew attention to the critical importance of the artistic intention. It influences the reception of the works by way of the objects/images/designs they paint on the barks. This is understood through the impact of the imaginative play of their aesthetics and the semantics of their encoded meanings on the feelings and thoughts of their tribal audiences (Morphy 2012, p. 289).⁷ The paintings themselves, however, are without agency, as agency implies intention. He made the following comment:

The paintings [bark paintings referred to in this paper] are powerful objects that affect people across cultures; [. . . Yolngu . . .] use them to persuade others of the value of their culture and way of life, and that the museum or rather those curators who are their agents, in using them in the way they do, are collaborating in the Yolngu project.⁸

1.2. *The Dreaming*

Bark paintings are inspired by scenes and figures from the Dreaming. This is the philosophic system of knowledge that informs the way Yolngu such as Wanambi and Marawili, look at the world—in much the same way that the Bible informs Christians. The Dreaming is based on ancient stories of Ancestors, whose actions resulted in the creation of the landscape and all living things including the Aboriginal peoples.

Most barks are produced in small communities of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and are painted in several styles that have evolved from local traditions.⁹ In Western Arnhem Land, they are beautiful fine-line outline drawings of subjects such as local animals, spirit figures and human-like forms which are inspired by the ancient local rock art (Taylor 1996). An X-ray style typically delineates the internal organs and skeletal features of such subjects, and, like Medieval icons, the images float on plane backgrounds. In more recent times, artists prefer to render the internal imagery less realistically and instead use geometric patterns. These represent the geographical places associated with that creature and its related myths.

The barks from eastern Arnhem Land, by contrast, are entirely covered by complex geometric designs in which the images of animals, plants, and human-like figures are embedded.¹⁰ The surface of such barks is known for the brilliance of its line-work (*miny'tji*). It is intricately detailed to create an optical shimmer (*bir'yun*) that is seen by the artist as a manifestation of the Ancestral presence and spiritual power operating within the work. Such geometries of surface are inspired by the sacred designs of ceremonial body design (Morphy 1989, pp. 21–40).

Distinguished Indigenous curator and scholar Djon Mundine explained that barks ‘represent a social history, an encyclopaedia of the environment, a place, a site, a season, a being, a song, a dance, a ritual, an ancestral story, and a personal history’ (Mundine 1996, p. 29).

He pointed out the controversial use of a 1963 design of the Ancestor Gurrmirringu by Yolngu artist, David Daymirringu. It was copied from a bark owned by Dr. Karel Kupka, for the 1967 Australian one dollar note. In documenting the artist’s comments on this image appropriation, Mundine acknowledged one aspect of the success of the artist’s agency, specifically, in the artist allowing the reproduction of his work because he foresaw the promotional benefits to him. Daymirringu reflected, ‘I was happy because Balanda everywhere now knows my painting’ (Mundine 1996, pp. 71–73).

Furthermore, Mundine explained the following:

Bark paintings are usually personal, and event-orientated. A painter specifically works in subject matter specifically related to their own history and spiritual connections, and often this material paints for particular rituals . . . they are a form of canta storia . . . [they also incorporate outside historical events such as those of the Macassan visitors and have] . . . been used as evidence in ‘land claims’

and native title cases. Legal repercussions from these cases have influenced international law ([Mundine 1996](#), pp. 30–31).

Indigenous leader and Social Justice Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, Mick Dodson, elaborated further, reflecting on their traditional inspiration and functional importance within traditional culture.

They [the barks] ‘... come out of a relationship with their environment, and their art comes directly out of that relationship.’ ... [they are part of a complex cultural context that is] ... political, social, and economic,’ ... [and they profoundly say] ... what I cannot do with words’ ([Dodson 1996](#), pp. 6–7).

Bark painting is a ritual act surrounded by rules and restrictions. They are part of a clan’s ancestral inheritance that are defined in part, in terms of relationships, rules, and networks of responsibility and authority that arise from and are connected to understandings of the Dreaming. They are a reflection of who can paint which design and in what context that design can be used ([Morphy 1991](#), p. 21).

1.3. Bark Production and Indigenous Agency

Contrary to early views, the production of bark paintings was the invention of local Indigenous populations. It was not an innovation of the Missions or Europeans who brokered the art and artefact production for the commercial market ([Macintosh 1973](#), pp. 8–11).¹¹

Painting a bark represented an act of personal agency. Firstly, they were created for restrictive view and used functionally in ceremony. Sometimes, this was for purposes of male initiation. They were secretly stored for later use. Secondly, they were created as secular works and used like picture books for storytelling and to pass on traditional knowledge. Secular paintings were created for independent use or applied to the walls of bark shelters where they could be used to teach. Such items were of ephemeral value and abandoned when the family relocated to another area. They were found on forest floors by anthropologists and visitors to the region and sent to museums.

Anthropologists from the early years of the 20th century, like Baldwin Spencer, Donald Thomson, and Ronald Berndt, had a respect and understanding of Indigenous culture, and they commissioned artists to paint images on barks that were inspired by either their ceremonial body designs or local rock art painting ([Taylor 1996](#), pp. 20–29; [Morphy 1991](#), pp. 13–21). Knowingly the artists encoded their designs with political agency, making their knowledge and power known to Westerners. The development of the missionary-promoted art/artefact economy followed, with the artists taking control of the production process. The artists realised the economic benefit of sharing their cultural images with outside audiences. They took the initiative for developing a repertoire of images that were deemed culturally safe for public viewing and appealing to Western tastes. They were not the ‘inside’, secret/sacred images that were painted for ceremony. Instead, they were transformed secular versions of these. Such depictions, which drew inspiration from the original traditional material, nonetheless had authenticity in their new adaptive mode. Critically, they appealed to the tastes of anthropologists, government officials, and collectors who were interested in the exotic allure of Indigenous culture and art. Further evidence of Indigenous control of their cultural material was seen in their development of an ever-expanding repertoire of culturally appropriate images to promote their cultural agendas.

The key focus of this investigation are the two collections of barks from the NMA,¹² the historically significant collections of Dr Karel Kupka (Figure 1) (72 barks) and the Dr Helen Groger-Wurm (Figure 2) (254 barks).¹³ As individual collections, these demonstrate a collective/relational agency. The artists from the different communities from which the barks were sourced responded to the requests of their commissioning agent collectively in ways that were culturally determined by their communities. Nigel Lendon explains this intercultural agency in relation to that of the artists and works commissioned for the *Aboriginal Memorial* in Canberra ([Lendon 2016](#)).¹⁴



Figure 1. Yirawala, 'Three Mimi men, spirits of rock, and turtle', 1963, 550 × 750 cm, ochre on eucalyptus bark, Dr. Karel Kupka Collection. Photography National Museum of Australia. Copyright Yirawala/Aboriginal Artists Agency.

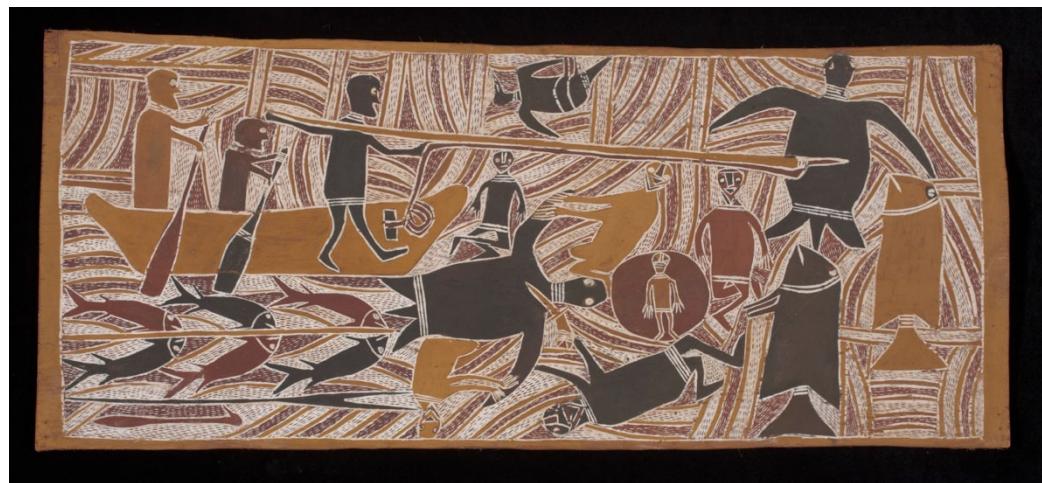


Figure 2. Mawalan Marika, 'The Bremer Island Turtle Man', 1967, 410 × 965 cm, ochre on eucalyptus bark, Groger-Wurm collection, photography National Museum of Australia. Copyright Mawalan Marika/Aboriginal Artists Agency.

The collections that were selected for comparison from others at the NMA, were chosen because they, unlike many of the others, were assembled over a short time span, but in the late 1960s. Kupka's was from 1965 and Groger-Wurm's from 1965 to 1970. This marked the early period when barks were actively commissioned, yet the traditions were relatively unaffected by western ideas. The selection also allows the impact of one individual to be evaluated rather than many, as would be the case for investigating some of the NMA collections that were sourced from the inputs of numerous people and government agencies. Significantly, the approach enabled the specific ways each collector worked with the artists and their communities to be evaluated, and from this to determine how much agency the artists could exercise in the commissioning process.¹⁵

The approach of using collection data that had been produced from collectors that had adopted the best professional standards of the day, ensured the data used in this paper, was culturally, as authentic as was possible. Both chosen collectors had significant anthropological expertise in working with Indigenous peoples and had published authoritative academic accounts on bark painting.¹⁶ Such was not the case for various other NMA collectors. The key material of review were the online database records of the National Museum of Australia and other published material about the collections and collectors. References for those listed in the paper are fully cited in the Appendix A.

1.4. *The Collectors*

Comparison of the approaches taken by both collectors indicates that Kupka was motivated by aesthetic concerns such as the symbolic use of lines and circles in the painting process, and writing broadly about the humanity of the culture (Owen 2006). He discusses the philosophic, mythological and conceptual underpinnings of the painting and the stylistic differences between one region of Arnhem Land and another (Rothwell 2007),¹⁷ Groger-Wurm was more focused on discussing the meanings of paintings in terms of their sequential place in the traditional mythological narratives to which they referred.¹⁸

Essentially, Kupka documented the art in the context of it representing an ancient culture that had existed largely unchanged from the dawn of time. Kupka commented, ‘The Aborigines of Australia live in a universe of their own, which has yet to reveal many of its secrets.’ He found in Arnhem Land bark painting a living art, which, in all its rawness and purity, was a tradition closely related to the most ‘primitive’ artistic expression (Kupka 1962, p. 14). He passionately believed the paintings of his collections would shed light on the origins of the human aesthetic impulse and the birth of art.¹⁹ As an artist, he was particularly attracted to the aesthetic agency of bark paintings and their conceptual underpinning. Expressing his view of the unique agency of each artist’s vision, Kupka commented ‘the aborigine painter is primarily a symbolist. He refines and simplifies his figures, creating an almost abstract decoration to express his ideas concisely’ (Kupka 1980, p. 10). He reflected on their purity of form and colour and as ‘expressions of myth merging with the present day’ (Rothwell 2007, p. 36). ‘He expresses reality as he knows it, imagines it or wishes it to be, not as he sees it’ (Kupka 1980, p. 10). Further, ‘The most striking proof of his subjectivity is his habit of representing the bone structures and internal organs of a creature that are not normally visible, a form of “X-ray” painting’ (Kupka 1980, pp. 12–13). He notes that the pictorial symbolism is a form of transforming “spoken literature” to “painted literature” (Kupka 1980, p. 13). It is a way of ‘writing down folk-tales, the stories of the Dream-Time (the subconscious) [aboriginal mythology] or the recital of historical events of importance’ (Kupka 1980, p. 13). Unlike Groger-Wurm however, he is less interested in documenting and interpreting the extensive mythological cycles of Arnhem Land, but rather the use of symbols in the paintings. He explains ‘the fine criss-cross lines he draws may represent honey or fire, seaweed or water, air, sand, rocks, bark herbs skin, fur, or feathers’ (Kupka 1980, p. 13), and the shapes maybe used to convey ‘a tree, a bush, a particular place, an island, rocks, a pile of clay . . . a stretch of sand, a waterhole, a stream, a bay’ (Kupka 1980, p. 14).

Compared to the personally driven concerns of Kupka’s interests in the aesthetic and philosophic concerns of the painting, Groger-Wurm’s interest in documenting traditional mythological narratives was driven by that of the institution that supported her. Outlining the specific achievement of her research, the then Head of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)) N.W.G. Macintosh noted that ‘while much of the mythological content has been published by others, in this book, the barks have been managed in sequence and integrated to illustrate successive incidents in each of the myth cycles.’ The collection represented, as completely as possible, a pictorial coverage of the main myths of the region and were categorised into sacred²⁰ and secular works.²¹ Within the sacred, there were two

divisions, the *Dua* and the *Jiridja*—where each represented a principal moiety of the region, and each moiety group had its own distinct narratives.²²

2. Discussion Indigenous Agency within the Documentation Process

At the time the remote Arnhem Land collections of Kupka and Groger-Wurm were undertaken, there was an openness by some communities to engage with outsiders. Specifically, they wanted assistance to help preserve their culture. For example, in eastern Arnhem Land, the elders had demonstrated their willingness to share secret cultural knowledge with others. They had released material of utmost importance to the culture in the 1963 Bark Petitions which were presented to the Federal Parliament and in the monumental barks of the early 1960s. The latter had been painted for the Yirrkala Missionary Church to establish the equality of the Indigenous religious art tradition with that of the Christian (Macintosh 1973, pp. vi, vii, ix; Groger-Wurm 1973, p. 132).²³

Both Kupka and Groger-Wurm, shared in the concern that Indigenous culture in Arnhem Land was being destroyed by Europeans and that urgent steps needed to be taken to preserve it for posterity.²⁴ Their proactive response was reflected in their respectful engagement with the artists and elders in the commissioning process and the lengths they took to develop trust with them in documenting the culture as authentically as was possible. Kupka is acknowledged as one of the first collectors to insist that each work carries the artist's name. At Milingimbi Kupka forged links with the powerful clan leaders and worked closely with artists, Djawa and Dawidi (Rothwell 2007). Kupka's comments reflect the sensitivity in cultivating such working relationships.

If we want to understand the story an artist is painting in all its detail, as it unfolds in his personal vision, then we must be present when he is working on it and watch him and listen to him as he progresses step by step (Kupka 1980, p. 14).

In Groger-Wurm's records we see this cultural respect reflected. In her face-to-face contacts with the artists and their senior knowledge holders she ensured they were in full control of the execution of all the aesthetic and semantic properties of their work. The final say was theirs in decisions around the production and interpretation of the bark images.

She observed the considerable initiatives exercised by the high-ranking members of the group in determining what the artists painted and then in taking charge of the interpretation of the meaning of the images. They were noticeably active in providing the 'inside' stories of an image, especially where the artist was not sufficiently advanced in the tribal hierarchy of the group to provide this information for themselves. Such interpretations are noted in Groger-Wurm's text. Further illustration of the agency of the elders, were their instructions that none of the paintings were to be sold but protected and made accessible to future generations of Yolŋgu. Their wishes prevailed. The collections are held at the NMA in Canberra (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. x, 15) and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (Stubbs 2014).

In the NMA online records for the database list of bark paintings in the collection, the data reflects the exercise of the artists agency in their provision of detailed physical descriptions for the iconography of the paintings for both collectors. For instance, Kupka's entry for Object No. 1985.0118.004 reads as 'Two Mimi Spirits (males) dancing' by Paddy Compass Namatbara, Croker Island 1963', and the entry for Object No. 1985.0118.0064 states 'three male mimi figures' by Wagbara. For Groger-Wurm paintings, the documentation process is essentially the same, except that, in reflecting her interest in the mythological narrative for the work, she often includes descriptions for the placement of the figures painted on the bark, as if to locate each section or group of figures together, connecting them spatially so as to imply a narrative sequence. Illustrative of this is, Object No. 1985.0129.0014, by Charlie Gunbuna which reads in the caption, 'Painting depicts a waterhole in centre, male & female goannas, a frilled neck lizard left, a snake & insects, and two brolgas, one killed by hunter,' and Object No. 1985.0132.0045 by Bodjija records 'Painting of a Dreaming site, depicts 4 fish and has horizontal bands dividing it into 8 unequal sections, 4 of which contain goannas.'

The online records of files associated with the Kupka collection were useful in identifying evidence of the artists agency in operation in Kupka's documentation practice. For the barks of the six artists of his NMA Yirrkala bark collection he only gives a summary account. He notes the artist's name for each of them, adding brief descriptions of the symbolic representations for the figurative images of local animals and ancestral heroes such as 'Bolgmo'. An exception to this brevity is the entry of a mythology associated with a painting by Narritjin Maymuru. It describes a fight between the Ancestral Crocodile, and Stingray Man, where Kupka noted, on the artist's advice, that each of the protagonists in the altercation was helped by their people and friends (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, File no. A-AB90). This narrative assistance from friends of the artist, reflects a collaborative, relational dimension of artist's agency in the documentation process. Here, Kupka is instructed in the local narrative for the story by a number of people.

In Kupka's records for his NMA Groote Eylandt barks, he presents more detailed descriptions of the local ancestral narratives, reflecting that the artists were taking a more hands-on role in the recording process at this location. An exemplar of this is the account given by the artist Nemigila of 'Namargia—southeast wind story' where the title is reflected in his narrative description (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, File no: A-AB117).²⁵ Kupka's notes for Abagera's painting of a partially flooded cave pinpoints the enthusiastic agency of the artist (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, File no: A-AB100). The documentation provides an exhaustive interpretation of the symbols used for two men, a duck, and men spearing bats. Likewise, for Mandjewarra's 'Creation of the Pleaides Constellation', a detailed narrative and symbolic description was provided by the artist (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, File no: A-AB106).

There were no online NMA records of files associated with the Groger-Wurm artworks used in the analysis. For the evaluation of her commissioning process, her publication text, *Australian Aboriginal Bark Paintings and their Mythological Interpretation, Volume 1 Eastern Arnhem Land* was used. It provided numerous instances of artistic agency. She observed that the artist not only directed the painting process to suit his individual requirements but responded in adaptive and innovative ways to the community codes of expressive representation (Groger-Wurm 1973, p. ix).²⁶ A case in point is one painting, where the artist, Mauwulan omitted one of the key characters because he noted that there was a lack of space on the bark surface to include the figure (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 21–23).²⁷ Artist Gawerin, added an additional bark to enable him to add all the required elements of the story he wanted to illustrate (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 79, 80),²⁸ while, in another painting, the artist, Milirbum incorporated a historical fact into the Dreaming narrative that had not been used before (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 21–23).²⁹ Further cases like this by the artist Mauwulan are cited where the artist presented a variant of the traditional story by adding an Ancestor not usually associated with the account (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 26–27).³⁰ Other documentation revealed that artists at different levels of initiation were painting alternative versions of the same narrative (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 27–28).³¹

Other instances that demonstrated the personal agency of the artist were revealed in accounts of the *Wagilag Myth*, where depictions of this story varied from one artist to another (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 37, 39).³² Other instances record the same artist painting two versions of the same setting (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 38, 39),³³ or two artists painting stylistic variations of the one setting. Another comparison revealed that the artists were adapting their style to meet the more refined aesthetic demands of the market (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 74–77).³⁴ Groger-Wurm noted that finer work was a response to commercial demand and was adopted by younger artists who were alert to the market demand for this trend (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 75–77). She also drew attention to the variation in expressive forms of the artist (Groger-Wurm 1973, pp. 83–86).³⁵

2.1. Indigenous Agency in Exhibition Display

Evidence for Indigenous agency in the NMA inhouse bark painting displays,³⁶ and for those identified in the exhibitions of other Australian and overseas institutions was an important outcome in the findings of this paper. Both the aesthetic and semantic values of bark paintings were identified as the persuasive mechanisms for instigating change to the cultural, social, economic, and political discourses associated with the works. So also, was the curatorial agency exercised by Indigenous professionals. Their actions in presenting paintings in innovative contexts of display and writing about them in new interpretative frames proved effective in advancing histories and relevancies for them and Indigenous Australian culture.

For instance, when Karel Kupka's barks were represented in several inhouse exhibitions at the NMA they contributed to progressing wider aesthetic and semantic understandings for the culture. In *First Australians* (2001–2009), Mawulan Marika's 'Sydney from the air', highlighted the complexity of its nonfigurative, abstract expression and ability to explain aeroplane travel (Morphy 2012, p. 289), (National Museum of Australia. Collection. No. 1985.118, Loan No. OLDGFA).³⁷ Its display in the *Endeavour* exhibition provided a challenging contemporary context the culture and for Sydney, the site of the British arrival in Australia. The bark was painted with an abstract, aerial image for the city,³⁸ and contextualised within a selection of three early spears collected from around Botany Bay and other related material. In addition, it showed how contemporary Indigenous cultural expression had been innovatively adapted for western audiences (National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.118).³⁹ Further, inhouse exhibitions such as 'Dawidi' and 'Gumana and Yunupingu' which were curated to provide in-depth histories for some of the major artistic figures and their cultures of Arnhem Land, benefitted from the aesthetic and semantic context provided by the inclusion of other Kupka's barks painted by these highly respected artists (National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.118),⁴⁰ (National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.118, Event Code.02.020).⁴¹

Likewise, a significant number of the Groger-Wurm works were exhibited in artist-related displays and those associated with the region's key mythological narratives and histories. Significant events from the program include exhibitions for 'Dawidi' (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0132, Event Code.03.01),⁴² 'Malangi' (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Event Code.02.020),⁴³ 'Marika' (National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.0153, Event Code.02.040),⁴⁴ 'Mutitpuy' (National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.0153, Event. Code.02.030),⁴⁵ 'Mithinarri' (National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.0153, Event. Code.02.05),⁴⁶ 'Cultural Expressions of the Monsoon' (National Museum of Australia, Collection nos. 1985.0132; 1985.0173, Event Code.02.11),⁴⁷ 'Kimberley' (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0173, Event Code.021.12),⁴⁸ and 'Yirawala' (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Event Code.03.010).⁴⁹

Epitomising the power of the artists' intention to affect non-indigenous audiences through the impact of the compelling aesthetic of the bark painting is the historic encounter of Pablo Picasso with Indigenous Australian culture. On seeing a Yirawala bark for the first time he reputedly declared (Figure 2)⁵⁰ 'This is what I have been trying to achieve all my life' (Le Brun Holmes 1992, p. 1). Such an appreciative response to the medium as Picasso's, is not only the experience of artworld aficionados like him. It distinguishes the response of audiences all over the world to such eloquent, fine-lined images as that to which Picasso responded. In Australia and overseas, exhibition displays of such impressive barks as those of Yirawala, were foundational to inspiring the establishment and success of the 1970s contemporary Indigenous art movement at Papunya. Based in remote desert communities acrylic and canvas were the new mediums and became widely recognised as Indigenous art (Geissler 2017, p. 171).⁵¹ Important in this history has been the indigenous agency of the artists and the interpretative narratives for the art provided by them and their elders. Further, in becoming recognised as legal instruments for artists and their land title

claim, their powerful impact in this context has been critical in preserving, reinvigorating, and promoting Indigenous cultural and political agendas (Geissler 2020, 2021).

The aesthetic impact of the medium, has also been pivotal in the move to acquire significant numbers of barks for Australian cultural institutions. Their semantic underpinnings have also been persuasive forces in these events. A specific case of this was the acquisitions from 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. Anthropologist Charles Mountford, the principal Australian instigator of the expedition, collected and documented the commissioned barks with a focus on the aesthetic and mythological qualities of the work (Specht 2012, pp. 3, 5; Read 1954).⁵² At this time, large collections of Indigenous Australian objects were collected from the region and later distributed to many public institutions in Australia including the NMA (Neale 1998, pp. 210–17). Two from the Groote Eylandt Smithsonian collection at the NMA that referred to astronomy were exhibited in *Mapping our World. Terra Incognita to Australia*, in the 2013 exhibition at the National Library of Australia, along with two from the Dr Karel Kupka collection. Reinforcing the significance of ancient Indigenous world perspectives to contemporary understandings of the world, they signalled the relevance of the views of their astronomy that informed them and spoke of the interconnectedness of the Indigenous view of ‘skyworld’ to Country. The cosmic content of these barks held sway with NMA’s senior Indigenous curator Margo Neale, whose curatorial agency was exercised in recontextualising this material for her publication *Astronomy. Sky Country* published by Thames and Hudson in their ‘Indigenous Knowledge Series’ in 2022 (Noonan et al. 2022).

The aesthetic agency of the NMA barks was critical to the success of the Museum’s most impressive overseas exhibition that would follow the NMA’s official opening in 2000. *Old Masters. Australia’s Great Bark Artists* (2007–2008) was curated with the ambition of celebrating their high aesthetic and cultural values (Simkin and Molony 2013, pp. 137–38). This initiative found resonance with their Chinese audiences, with one visitor reporting the exhibition was ‘complex and beautiful’ (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, File No: D14/5614).⁵³ The exhibition featured over 120 barks and was toured to China from 2018 to 2020 and displayed in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Chengdu, and Taiwan.⁵⁴

The collection was persuasive in shaping the political discourses between China and Australia. This was outlined in the bilateral agreement between the NMA and the National Museum of China (Trinca 2017). The NMA’s director Matthew Trinca wrote that it ‘promoted 45 years of bilateral diplomatic relations [and the] opportunity to showcase the strengths of [their] respective collections’ (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Document No: D17 23808). Within the exhibition, the political impact of the work was detailed in a wall text promoting reconciliation. It stated that ‘the artworks stand as a bridge between First Australians and later settled peoples’ (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Document No: D17 23808).

Also persuasive within the display was the aesthetic and semantic agency of the artists. This was inferred in wall texts which referred to cultural and social discourses associated with the works. They represented statements of individual and group identity, linking the people to their sacred lands, religious beliefs, and history (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Document No: D17 23808). A visitor comment reinforced this noting that the exhibition was ‘at once monumental and intimate’ (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, File No: D14/5614). There were 18 barks from the Dr Helen Groger-Wurm collection (National Museum of Australia, Accession no: 1985.0118.02, Old Master Barks, Event Code OMB-prog.5106; Simkin and Moloney 2013, pp. 49, 50, 75, 112, 121, 123, 127, 134, 135, 143, 145, 171, 175, 176, 199)⁵⁵ and nine from the Karel Kupka collection (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Old Master Barks, Event Code OMB-prog.5106).⁵⁶ Amplifying Indigenous agency within this exhibition, were the commentaries by the NMA’s visiting Senior Indigenous curator Margo Neale. In her Beijing lectures she promoted understandings of the art and the culture and spoke to the media at the exhibition opening in 2018.

In 2007, the dazzling aesthetic agency of Yolngu leader, Narritjin Maymuru's bark paintings was an important element determining their selection for the *Creative Fellows* exhibition at the Drill Hall Gallery of the National Gallery of Australia. One was selected from the Kupka collection (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Loan No. OL 2007/0015),⁵⁷ and one from the Groger-Wurm collection (National Museum of Australia. Loan No. OL 2007/0015).⁵⁸ Together, they were amongst the 14 barks of Narritjin's work held at the National Museum of Australia that were displayed to showcase the artist's outstanding stylistic accomplishments.

Further evidence of the aesthetic and semantic agency of artists was illustrated in exhibition *Crooked Painting. The Art of the Tiwi* at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) of 2020–2021, where the poetics and informing mythological narratives of the barks energized the display with an informing context for the reinvigoration of the Tiwi peoples 'cultural memory and ceremonial spaces' (National Gallery of Victoria 2021). Providing authoritative insights on the art, Indigenous curator Myles Russell-Smith noted in his catalogue essay *Tiwi: Art and Artists* that the aesthetic and conceptual qualities of the early barks from Tiwi were linked to similar ones that are found in the contemporary mediums of paper and canvas (Russell-Smith 2021). There were 11 NMA bark paintings included in the exhibition. Five were from the Groger-Wurm collection (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0132, Loan No. OL 2019.0014).⁵⁹

In 2016–2017, at the Haus de Kunst's Munich show *Post-War Art between the Pacific and Atlantic 1945–1965*, the unique aesthetic and semantic agencies of the artist were critical in the selection of Mawulan Marika's symbolic depiction of 'Sydney from the air' 1963. Its inclusion made a case for recognising abstraction as a contemporary expressive means that was used in the bark medium. In addition, it reinforced the view that everyday subjects such as the artist's recent aeroplane flight to Sydney were painted by artists (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Loan No: OL 6184).

Another overseas display, which acknowledged the semantic agencies of bark painting and elaborated on the intriguing cultural discourses associated with them, was an exhibition at Museum Fur Volkekunde in Basel in 1991. Two early Groger-Wurm barks, one by Ginginyirala depicting images of mimi spirit figures and the other by Dawulinyera, featuring hunters at a corroboree, enhanced the cultural insights of the display with their use of traditional subjects. They were exhibited alongside two similar barks from the Basel collection (National Museum of Australia, Collection Nos. 1985.0153.042, 1985.0153.043).⁶⁰ For similar curatorial purposes in 1994, several works of Midjau-Midauru and Paddy Compass Namatbara from the Kupka collection were proposed to tour the USA (National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.118, Box No. B07/836),⁶¹ while, in 2007, a painting from the Kupka collection was exhibited in the Volkekunde in Frankfurt (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Loan No: OL 2007/0021, File No: 88/0538).

2.2. Indigenous Curatorial Agency

Evaluations of the influential impacts of Indigenous curatorial agency within the exhibition survey provided support for the view that these energising mechanisms were highly significant in forging new understandings for the culture. In 2004, through the agency of Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins, wider understandings for the barks of the exhibition *Crossing Country. The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* were advocated. Progressive views of the culture were advanced not only through the impact of her curatorial selection and writing but also as a consequence of her publishing the ground-breaking essay by pioneering Indigenous artist John Mawurndjul, in the exhibition catalogue. In the very reflective words of 'I'm a chemist man, myself', Mawurndjul claims his artistic leadership within the bark painting movement. Inspired by his dreams and speaking to his Ancestors, he acknowledged his invention of the new fine-line or *rarrk* crosshatching design that he used for his paintings, a style which had become highly influential to contemporary bark painters within his region. A remarkable feature of its expression was the creation of an optically dazzling surface, where its brilliance was seen as a reflection of Ancestral agency

[of the Rainbow Serpent] embedded within the work, but also the agency of the artist. Mawurndjul explained, ‘we don’t paint its human form [ie the Spirit form of Ngalyod the Rainbow Serpent]. We only paint the spirit’ ([Mawurndjul 2004](#), p. 138).

Insightful observations about western Arnhem Land art advanced by Perkins writings include statements that ‘the paintings have morphed from rock walls onto gallery walls … [and her notes that its] complex course [as a movement] has evolved through the contested waters of ethnography, anthropology and finally museology … [which may be understood] through [its] assimilation of new materials, new tools, new markets and new meanings’ ([Perkins 2004](#), p. 16). Further she explained that while the artists of today ‘acknowledge their debt to the creative pioneers, Yirawala and Marralwanga’ and the many unattributed artists that came before them, they see themselves as a new people who have ‘changed things [the painting traditions]’ ([Perkins 2004](#), p. 18). Perkins claimed that the art movement was one ‘that confounds the conventions of western art in simultaneously invoking the customary and the contemporary’ ([Perkins 2004](#), p. 15; [Geissler 2017](#)).⁶² In summary she observes, ‘The unique western Arnhem Land aesthetic reveals the tensile strength of tradition and its currency as a template for contemporary interpretation’ ([Perkins 2004](#), p. 19). The significant impact of the show was reinforced seven years later by Indigenous curator Matt Poll. In 2021 he commented that the exhibition drew attention to ‘the vigour of Aboriginal contemporary art, but also show[ed] its genealogy back to the 20th century’ ([Poll and Harris 2021](#)). This landmark exhibition was held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney.⁶³ There were 5 paintings from the Kupka collection and 10 from the Groger-Wurm collection selected for the exhibition (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Loan No. OL 2004/0005; [Perkins 2004](#)).

In 1997, Indigenous agency was in play in the writings of legendary activist and curator of barks, Djon Mundine.⁶⁴ In writing his essay ‘Meetings with Remarkable Men and Women’ for the exhibition catalogue *The Painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story, 1937–1997* ([Caruana and Lendon 1997](#)) he enhanced the gravitas of the exhibition histories by describing his deep cultural understanding of a major creation story for central and eastern Arnhem Land. This was of singular significance as Mundine had worked at the coalface for over a decade with the remote communities in Arnhem land. Mundine detailed accounts of the local culture in his essay explaining the complex evolution of Dhathangu’s single subject paintings relating to the *Wagilag Sisters* creation story ([Mundine 1997b](#), pp. 4, 6, 7, 52).⁶⁵ Displayed in 1997 at the National Gallery of Australia the NMA loaned three Groger-Wurm paintings to the National Gallery of Australia for this exhibition.⁶⁶

The nuanced understanding the use of the term artist’s agency are highlighted in several comments by Indigenous artists Indigenous artists where the aesthetic and semantic underpinnings of the bark hold powerful sway with their audiences. In 2022, Yolŋu artist Mr Wanambi elaborated on its aesthetic, cultural, social and political impacts ([Marawili 2022](#)).⁶⁷ ‘When you look at a bark, you don’t see a flat surface. It’s like the surface of the water. When us Yolŋu look at it, we jump into family, kinship, land, colours, the strength, and the power; it just draws us in … The bark tells of our identity, our kinship, our destiny’ ([Marawili 2022](#)).⁶⁸

At the same exhibition, artist Djambawa Marawili, in noting that Yolŋu ‘art … represents our soul and our mind’ ([Marawili 2022](#)), pointed to the complex cultural and political factors within the bark collection of the exhibition. In reflecting on the reaction to the exhibition of barks in the USA, he commended the American acknowledgement of the enduring nature of ancient Yolŋu culture and imagery, as well as its link to country and ‘passing the [aforementioned traditional] knowledge to America through [the Yolŋu] art’. Furthermore, he drew attention to the critical issue of reconciliation [between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia that the work represents] that was raised by the exhibition ([Marawili 2022](#)).

More broadly, Wanambi identified both the cultural and the political effects of the artist’s agency when reflecting on the ways that the platform of the overseas exhibition and its curatorial agency facilitated the promotion of critical intercultural exchange and in

reinvigorating Yolŋu culture. '[It allows us to] share our culture and do research on our paintings ... [on seeing them] future generations [will] ... gain respect for those people that came before ... [also] we are making art for the children who are coming behind us, giving a clear message to them. It is something that we really need to make the art move into our eyes and our souls, to make it really do something important' ([Marawili 2022](#)).

The potency of indigenous curation was again evident for the British Museum exhibition of *Indigenous Australia. Enduring Civilisation* in 2014, and later in 2016 in the commentary on its influence by Indigenous curator at the National Gallery of Victoria, Myles Russel-Smith. Curated by ([Gaye Sculthorpe 2017](#)), the impact of the NMA Kupka bark by Yolŋu artist Mathaman Marika which depicted a Macassan fishing for trepang, provided provocative colonial, subtly underlining the difference between the Macassan and the British encounters with Aboriginal Australians. Here, the mutually respectful and beneficial trading and cultural relationship that existed in pre-colonial times, between Aboriginal Australians and Macassan visitors to Arnhem Land was reinforced, rather than the violent one that defined British settlement. (National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Loan No: OL 2014/0012).⁶⁹ More broadly, this display of Indigenous Australian culture and Indigenous agency drew widespread attention from the significant media attention it created which incited skirmishes at the entrance to the Museum. Activists using large posters captioned with provocative political slogans such as 'stolen land, stolen culture', led Russell-Smith to conclude that it drew attention to the 'colonial empire's role in the dispossession and oppression of Aboriginal people and emphasise that Australia (the British colony) was and always would be Aboriginal land' ([Russell-Smith 2016](#), p. 486). It also alerted audiences to urgent issues surrounding the need to repatriate cultural objects that had been stolen from their originating communities in Australia.

Significantly, in this current investigation, there has been little evidence that refers to the violence displacement histories of Indigenous resistance and sovereignty that shaped colonial settlement of Australia by the British. Themes of historical injustice and militant identity have largely been subjects taken up by urban Indigenous artists since the 1980s and are not found in the bark collections discussed in this paper. Histories associated with human rights are however, subjects addressed in other bark collections at the NMA ([McLean 2016](#), pp. 209–46).

The words of distinguished Yirrkala elder Galarrwuy Yunupingu, however present a vital context for understanding the complexities of Indigenous agency associated with the barks of this review. He proposes the following reflection in relation to the medium advancing below for consideration of the discourses associated with Indigenous culture, law, politics and land title.

I am not asking you to ignore the beauty of the work; to my eyes, the art of my people surpasses that of other cultures—I can't ignore my own prejudices! But I do ask that you recognise that the paintings are not just beautiful pictures. They are about Aboriginal law, Aboriginal life. They are also about our resistance over the last 200 years, and the refusal to forget the land of our Ancestors. They are about cultural, social, and political survival ([Yunupingu 1993](#), p. 66).

3. Conclusions

For the current investigation of Indigenous agency in the bark collections of Australia, the theoretical frames proposed for the understanding agency were those of Howard Morphy, a distinguished anthropologist in the field. These defined agency as a transformational power that resided with the artist, who exercised this persuasive power through the impact of the unique aesthetic and semantic properties of his bark. That they are transformational, is evident in the way they capture the imagination of their audiences and trigger change in them and their actions, through this persuasive engagement. The knock-on effect is evidenced in the ways that they subsequently impact various discourses on Indigenous art and culture.

Morphy attributed an additional agency to the Museum in which barks were displayed, seeing them implicated in promoting artists paintings. Curatorial agency was discussed within this context, with a special focus on the outcomes arising from the ways Indigenous curators and writers work with the exhibitions in which the barks were displayed. The discourses of likely influence were identified as those associated with Indigenous culture, society, economics and politics.

The summary account of the Dreaming, set an informing context for understanding the traditional knowledge about which the aesthetics and semantics of the barks referred.

To give context to the key protagonists of the paper, the academic background of Dr. Karel Kupka and Dr. Helen Groger-Wurm was reviewed, and their professional interests identified. Kupka was interested in aesthetics and human cultural expression. Groger-Wurm's, the systematic recording of the mythological cycles of the region. The justification for selecting the two collections for the study was outlined in the following ways. To obtain authoritative data, the collections were limited to the early period of the mid to late 1960s when the remote communities in Arnhem Land were largely unaffected by western influence and traditionally inspired work was still produced. Further, the collectors were selected for their distinguished academic training, publishing record and experience in the field.

The findings of the paper demonstrated that the professional expertise and specific interests of the collectors did not affect the agency of the artists. The data indicated that their respectful approach to their artists allowed artists to take control of their productions and undertake their commissions in culturally authentic ways. Various examples were cited which showed the artists working innovatively and adaptively. As such the evidence, challenged perceptions that Indigenous culture was static and archaic. It demonstrated instead that it was very dynamic, fostering individuality and proactive responsiveness by the artists to the pressures of a changing world.

The analysis of a select number of exhibition accounts in which the barks were displayed highlighted the powerful agency of the Indigenous artists, curators and writers engaged in these events in promoting more comprehensive understandings of Indigenous and Australian culture. Significantly, their actions were identified as influential to shaping discourses associated with Indigenous culture, society, economies, and politics in both national and international settings. In the context of the NMA, the impact of these findings is amplified by the Museum's online and inhouse institutional frameworks today, and the ongoing programs for the national and international displays of their bark collection.

In summary, this essay presented a snapshot view of various contexts in which Indigenous agency has informed discourses associated with the NMA bark collection and Indigenous art and culture. In so doing, it points to the wealth of Indigenous agency yet to be identified within the many other bark painting collections of the NMA, Australia and overseas.⁷⁰

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Appendix A

1. National Museum of Australia, Collection No.1985.118, File no: A-AB90.
2. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0132, Event Code.03.01.
3. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0132, Loan No. OL 2019.0014.
4. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Event Code.02.020.
5. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Event Code.03.010.
6. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Loan No. OL 2014/0012.
7. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Loan No. OL 2007/0015.
8. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Loan No. OL 2007/0021.
9. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Loan No. OL 2004/0005.
10. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0153, Loan No. OL 2002/0008.
11. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.0173, Event Code.021.12.
12. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118.
13. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Box No. B07/836.
14. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Document No. D14/5614.
15. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Document No. D17 23808.
16. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, File no: A-AB117.
17. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, File no: A-AB100.
18. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, File no: A-AB106.
19. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Loan No. OL 2007/0015.
20. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Loan No. OL 6184.
21. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Loan No. OL DGFA.
22. National Museum of Australia, Collection No. 1985.118, Old Masters Barks, Event Code.OMB-prog.5106.
23. National Museum of Australia, Collection Nos. 1985.0132; 1985.0173, Event Code. 02.11.
24. National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.0153.
25. National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.0153, Event Code.02.030.
26. National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.0153, Event Code.02.040.
27. National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.0153, Event Code.02.05.
28. National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.118, Event Code.02.020.
29. National Museum of Australia, Collection. No. 1985.118, Loan No. OL 2007/0021.

Notes

- ¹ As a way to exemplify this expressive tradition, this paper investigates evidence for Indigenous agency in the collections of the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra, where the author is a Visiting Researcher. She is also an Associate Researcher at the University of Wollongong. The NMA has the largest and most historic collection of barks in the world with around 2500 works. It focuses specifically on the collections of Dr. Helen Groger-Wurm (Wurm) and Dr. Karel Kupka (Kupka), and looks at the politics of bark painting, as well as their impacts in the many contexts of their exhibition ([Macintosh 1973](#), p. v; [Groger-Wurm 1973](#), pp. 8–11). A critical concern for the profession in the mid-1960s was to clarify when bark painting had been invented in Arnhem Land. Dr. Helen Groger-Wurm detailed a regional history for the medium within Australia, citing several examples for where it was referred to in the turn-of-the-century historical and anthropological records.
- ² While significant collections of bark paintings are held in Australian cultural institutions, there are many collections in the USA, Canada, United Kingdom, France, The Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland, Carol Cooper documents many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collection in overseas museums ([Cooper 1989](#)).
- ³ Anthropologist Baldwin Spencer began collecting barks from Oenpelli in western Arnhem Land in 1912. Assisted by his partner, local buffalo shooter and farmer, Paddy Cahill, their collections were sent largely to the National Museum of Victoria. Many, however, were sent to overseas institutions.
- ⁴ In 1991 Terry Smith was the first to fully theorize a place for Indigenous Australian art within contemporary Australian art ([Smith 1991](#), pp. 552–54). Within the many contexts of his discussion, he speaks of the “sophistication” of its imagery, its variability, complexity, growing artworld acceptance and influence within Australian art ([Smith 1989](#), p. 18; [1991](#), pp. 552–54). Ian McLean discusses the pioneering role taken by artist John Mawurndjul in adapting bark painting to meet the demands of the contemporary artworld and the capitalistic economy. Mawurndjul won Australia’s most prestigious contemporary art prize in 2003 and was honoured with a solo exhibition at the Museum Tinguley in Basel in 2005. For the 2006 opening of the Musée du quai Branly he was commissioned to decorate the ceiling and a pillar in the Museum bookshop ([McLean 2016](#), pp. 182–87). The global

- importance of bark paintings is identified by Henry Skerritt. In comparing the impact of Nongirrna Marawili's bark painting to the art of Paul Cezanne and Fred Williams, he writes, that they speak 'both within and across worlds' (Skerritt 2018, p. 35) and are 'both profoundly contemporary and political' (Skerritt 2018, p. 36).
- 5 (Merriam-Webster 2022), 'agency'. Gell views agency as not so much about meaning and communication, but instead about doing.
- 6 Op. cit. Merriam-Webster website.
- 7 Morphy discusses the power of aesthetic agency with regard to that which operates in the bark paintings of the Yolngu. The design is received as a potent manifestation of the Ancestor, invested with its spiritual power and the deep spiritual philosophies of the Dreaming (refer to Morphy 1989).
- 8 Personal email from the author 22 June 2022.
- 9 Some barks were painted in the Kimberley of Western Australia. These feature images of the Wandjina water spirit (Akerman 2000, pp. 226–39).
- 10 Common images include kangaroos, crocodiles, barramundi, emu, spirit figures, echidna, flying foxes, mussels, water birds, snakes, and plants. Human-like figures are seen hunting, dancing, or in ceremony, accompanied by spears, dilly bags, boats, or paddles. The complex imagery is that used for male initiation body painting for the sacred Mardayin ceremony.
- 11 A critical concern for the profession in the mid-1960s was to clarify when bark painting had been invented in Arnhem Land. Dr. Helen Groger-Wurm detailed a regional history for the medium within Australia, citing several examples for where it was referred to in the turn-of-the-century historical and anthropological records.
- 12 Other collectors with a distinctive approach to the Indigenous artists they collected/commissioned work from for the National Museum of Australia include A.P. Elkin, Charles Mountford, T.E Strehlow, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, Dorothy Bennett, Karel Kupka, Donald Thomson, and Tony Tuckson.
- 13 Both published accounts of their experiences and took great pains to connect respectfully with artists and elders in recording their cultural stories.
- 14 Nigel Lendon highlighted various aspects of artwork agency that are operational within museum contexts in his discussion of the historical trajectory of the reception of the Aboriginal Memorial installation now at the National Gallery of Australia. Lendon proposed that they exert a collective agency that operates as a form of intercultural agency in the range of specific sociopolitical contexts of their production and their exposure to an outside world.
- 15 Larger collections that had been assembled through the inputs of many individuals included the Aboriginal Arts Board Collection (AAB) (estimated number—456 barks), The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Association (AIATSIS) (estimated number—183 barks), the Maningrida Art & Culture (estimated number—103 barks) and the Australian American Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) (estimated number—82 barks).
- 16 Groger Wurm had published Groger-Wurm, Helen, 1973. *Australian Aboriginal Bark Paintings and their Mythological Interpretation, Volume 1 Eastern Arnhem Land*. Australian Aboriginal Studies No. 30. Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and Karel Kupka had published Kupka, Karel 1962. *Un art à l'état brut*. La Guilde du Livre, Lausanne.
- 17 As a student in Paris, Kupka had studied Laws, while pursuing his great passion for tribal arts, to which he had been introduced by influential art theorist Andre Breton.
- 18 Groger-Wurm travelled to Arnhem Land several times from 1965 to 1970, visiting the communities of Milingimbi, Yirrkala, Numbulwar, and Maningrida in eastern Arnhem Land, and Crocker Island and Oenpelli in western Arnhem Land. She also collected work from Groote Eylandt, Melville Islands, and Port Keats. The eastern material provided the basis for her only scholarly publication on Arnhem Land bark painting (Groger-Wurm 1965, 1973). The research was conducted over 7 months during the 1966–1969 period, in the communities of Milingimbi, Yirrkala, Numbulwar, and Maningrida in eastern Arnhem Land. The 1965 collection from Dr Helen Groger-Wurm for the National Museum of Australia consisted of 72 bark paintings along with sculptures, burial posts, and sacred boards.
- 19 Apart from the earlier works of F. McCarthy, C.P. Mountford, J. Davidson, A.P. Elkin, and a few others, the first overall studies of Aboriginal art were by Kupka.
- 20 In the sacred paintings, many of the symbols used to portray clan country and mythical incidents related to it are replicas of body paintings which men displayed on their chests when important rituals were enacted. The symbols are believed to have been determined by ancient mythical beings.
- 21 The secular paintings are everyday subjects motivated by the artists desire to focus on subjects that he chooses.
- 22 The sacred bark paintings of the *Dua* Moiety were assigned to seven chapters: The Djanggawul, The Wagilag Sisters, Woijal, the Wild Honey Ancestral Being, The Wongar Shark, Buldmandji, The Wongar Mosquito, The Thunderman, and The Bremer Island Turtle Hunter. The sacred bark paintings of the *Jiridja* Moiety were allocated to five chapters: The Ancestral Beings, Barama and Lajindjung, The Gathering of the Wongar Beings in the Plain Country of Arnhem Bay, The Formation of Clouds, The Wongar Dogs, and The Spirit Woman, Wuradilagu.
- 23 Macintosh highlighted the utilitarian value of bark painting to the culture, noting the success of the Yirrkala Petitions of 1963 and the bark painting display in the Yirrkala Missionary Church. He noted that the profession was deeply aware of [the

- anthropological importance of Indigenous] heritage and concerned [to assist them in] sustaining their traditional life. Groger-Wurm also drew attention to the negative impact of the commercial market on the aesthetic of bark painting being produced to meet the tastes of the current art market.
- 24 The responsiveness of Groger-Wurm's research to Indigenous concerns about the decline in their cultural knowledge is discussed by the then Head of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), N.W.G. Macintosh ([Macintosh 1973](#), pp. vii, ix). In his 'foreword' to Groger-Wurm's publication, he explained that '[her work represents] the type of history ... that many present-day Aborigines are demanding to know [about themselves], [and we expect this demand] ... to increase enormously in the future' ([Macintosh 1973](#), p. v).
- 25 The quote reads as, 'A very big man used to live here at Groote. He went to the rock and climbed to the top. He looked to the southeast if his friend, another big man (giant), is coming. He could not see him, so he made a fire. That other man saw the fire and he came. The two men together made Namargia the southeast wind. They had to wait 2 days before the wind came but, after, it was alright.'
- 26 Groger-Wurm stated that the objective of her research program was to obtain 'a systematic and comprehensive collection of [traditionally made] material culture items [that were] of significance to the Aborigines in the area ... [They included] pubic covers, ornaments, mats, baskets, dillybags ... fishing and hunting equipment, carvings, and bark paintings.' Most of the documentation in her publication was not for the NMA Groger-Wurm collections, but presumably for the Darwin collections from this period. They were included in this paper as examples of the Indigenous agency exhibited by the artists at this time.
- 27 In the traditional approach in painting narratives of the *Djanggawu Sister Myth*, all three Sisters were depicted. An exception to this was noted by Groger-Wurm in one of her commissioned works, e.g., for Figure 1 'The Djanggawu's journey from Bralgu and their arrival in Port Bradshaw', where the artist, Mauwulan (Mawulan), omitted one of the sisters, because of lack of space on his image to paint her in. He explained that this was acceptable as he felt that her presence could be inferred from the setting.
- 28 For the images of Plate 102 'Barama [Ancestor] with two fish' and Plate 103 of the same subjects by artist Gawerin, the artist's innovative response to the subject was to use two barks for his work, not one. He found in the execution of his painting that a single bark was too small for his story. The second bark, Plate 103 was twice as large as the first.
- 29 For example, in Plate 3 'The Djanggawu on Galbibingu and Wabilinga Islands', the artist, Milarbum, contemporised the traditional narrative by incorporating the existence of the more recent Baijini figure. He explained to Groger-Wurm that 'a historical fact of long ago [the pre-Macassan traders, called the Baijini who were not of the mythical era, were] transferred back to the time of creation, eventually becoming incorporated [as figures] into the sacred mythology'.
- 30 In the painting of Plate 16 'At Maluwa', the artist, Mauwulan, advocated for a different version of the traditional story. Against interpretations of the incident depicted by other local Djambarbingu that the brother Djanggawu is never mentioned in this incident, Mauwulan insisted that the brother Djanggawu was the songman in the image and the sisters made the ceremony.
- 31 For the painting of Plate 18 'In Djawalngngur Djawarrknga' by the artist Nanganaralil, Groger-Wurm noted two interpretations for the image. In so doing, she highlighted that the rules concerning the content ownership of an image were strictly controlled by artistic protocols and not directed by the commissioning agent. One artist reflected that he was 'not advanced far enough in the ritual indoctrination to know the esoteric interpretation of it [the image in the bark]'. The other, presented the 'inside' version later. The latter was a much more detailed narrative than the former and was later disclosed to Groger-Wurm by the artist's father.
- 32 For example, the juxtapositions of Plate 33 'Julunggul', by artist Munjal, with Plate 34 'Julunggul', by artist Gunbuna, demonstrate how an interpretation of the same subject varies between artists.
- 33 Artist Libundja in painting Plate 35 'Julunggul [Ancestor] at Gruawona' and Plate 36 'Gruawona and djulgu' [conch shellfish] reflected the individuality of his approach in painting different aspects of the same setting. By contrast, artist Nanganaralil in painting the same theme in Plate 37 showed a marked variation in style to Libundja.
- 34 This was revealed in a comparative analysis of depictions of the Ancestral Being, Barama. In Plate 93, the older artist Gumug executed his painting using coarse brush marks. By contrast, for the image of Plate 94 by younger artist Gawerin, finer brush strokes were deployed, as by the artist in Plate 95.
- 35 That one artist paints a narrative in a detailed way and another simplifies the depiction is evident in the comparison of artist Munggeraui's rendition of 'a fire at the Gumaidj *nara* ground in Breinbrein which features the Ancestor Nureri' of Plate 113 and Plate 114 by artist Jama. Jama's image is the simplified painting.
- 36 Inhouse exhibitions in which both Kupka and Groger Wurm collections have been exhibited include those curated to explore themes associated with family, art, culture, economics and politics.
- 37 Accession no. 1985.0118.0006.
- 38 The spears were on loan from the Cambridge University and exhibited with 93 other artworks including numerous items associated with Captain James Cook.
- 39 The Event Code was OO Endeavour—[ENMZ], Program 7878.
- 40 Accession no. 1985.0118 0002 (Birrikidji Gumana, 'Minhala the Long-Neck Tortoise at Gangan', 1963).
- 41 For Event Code.02.020—Gumana and Yunupingu, there were 14 barks in the exhibition.

- 42 For Event Code.03.010—Dawidi Story, an NMA inhouse exhibition, there were eight bark paintings, with four by Dawidi Djulwadak. The Groger-Wurm works were Accession no. 1985.0132.0003 (Dawidi Djulwadak, 'The Wagilag Story', 1967) and Accession no. 1985.0132.0010 (Dawidi Djulwadak, 'Wagilag Ritual', 1967). The barks from other collections were Accession no. 1985.0259.0005 (Dawidi Djulwadak, painting depicting a dilly bag fish trap made by the Wawilak sisters) and Accession no. 2007.0053.1023 (Dawidi Djulwadak, bark painting).
- 43 For Event Code.02.020—Malangi, there were seven paintings with two barks from the Groger-Wurm collection.
- 44 For Event Code.02.040—Marika, there were 11 paintings with five barks from the Groger-Wurm collection.
- 45 For Event Code.02.030—Mutitjpu, there were six paintings with two barks from the Groger-Wurm collection.
- 46 For Event Code.02.050—Mithinarri, there were eight paintings with one bark from the Groger-Wurm collection.
- 47 For Event Code.02.11—Cultural Expressions of the Monsoon, there were 15 paintings with four barks from the Groger Wurm Collection.
- 48 For Event Code.021.12—Kimberley, there were four paintings with one from the Groger-Wurm collection: Accession no. 1985.0173.0007 (bark painting depicting four Wandjina).
- 49 For Event Code.03.010—Yirawala, there were 10 paintings with four barks from the Groger-Wurm collection.
- 50 Yirawala is one of the most acclaimed Western Arnhem Land artists, an innovator, cultural leader, and activist.
- 51 They have 'abstract' geometric designs or figurative images of local animals and spirit figures. The works have been exhibited to much acclaim internationally and seen to be foundational to the success of Indigenous Art in Australia ([Geissler 2020](#)).
- 52 Volume one of the published records of the expedition 'Art, Myth, and Symbolism. American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land' (1948) was written by [Mountford \(1956\)](#) and published by Melbourne University Press, Melbourne in 1956. For a discussion of Montford's interest in Indigenous art, refer to Specht 2012. Montford's collection of rock art and bark paintings became the basis of his contributions in the *UNESCO World Art Series No. 3* ([Read 1954](#)). They had significant impact through their publication in many articles in National Geographic Magazine and through their use in his films and lectures in the USA and Australia. In 1956, 171 bark paintings from the expedition were shared between the six major art galleries in Australia. Several are in the collections of the NMA.
- 53 Included was Accession no. 1985.0118.0001 (Birrikidji Gumana, Ancestral hero of the Yirritja moiety: Banaitja (Lanytjung) and Yirritja animals).
- 54 There were 122 works listed in the Museum catalogue.
- 55 There were 18 barks from the collection displayed. They included Accession no. 1985.0132.0074 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'Djirridid ga Damala', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0130.0072 (Bokarra Maymuru, 'Storm', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0132.0047 (Mungurrawuy Yunupingu, 'The Eagle Hawke Men and the Flying Fox Girls', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0132.0044 (Mutitjpu Munungurr, 'The Fires Dreaming at Yathikipa', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0132.0069 (Mutitjpu Munungurr, The Djan 'kawu in Djapu Clan Territory with Mana the Shark', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0132.0053 (Mawalan Marika, 'The Bremer Island Turtle Man', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0132.0037 (Mathaman Marika, 'Rirratjinu Mortuary Ceremony', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0132.0061 (Mithinarri Gurruwiwi, 'Wititj the Gápu Snake', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0132.0003 (Dawidi, 'The Wagilak Story', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0132.0010 (Dawidi, 'Wägilak Ranga (Elder Sister)', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0132.0031 (Paddy Dhathanu, Wititj ga Gandawuk' ga Wurrdjarra (Wititj with Rock Wallaby and Sand Palm in Seed'), 1967), and Accession no. 1985.0132.0007 (Binyinyuwu, 'Djalumbu (Hollow-Log Coffin) Mortuary Ceremony', 1967).
- 56 Displayed were artists Yirawala, Paddy Compass Namatbara, January Nangunyari, Narritjin Maymuru, Birrikidji Gumana, Mithinarri Gurruwiwi, and Mawulan Marika.
- 57 Accession no. 1985.0118.001 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'Fight between the Crocodile and the Stingray Man').
- 58 Dr Helen Groger-Wurm collection, Accession no. 1985.0132.0074 (Narritjin Maymuru, ('Djirrda and Damala', 1967) and Accession no. 1985.0258.0012 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'Guwak, Possum and Emus at Djarrakpi', 1974). Barks from other NMA collections included Accession no. 1985.0259.0393 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'Journey of a Guwak', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0259.0082 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'Milky Way', 1967), Accession no. 1985.0259.0414, (Narritjin Maymuru, 'Untitled', 1965), Accession no. 1985.0067.0091 (Narritjin Maymuru, Manggalili clan painting, 1948), Accession no. 1985.0242.0001 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'Creation Stories of the Manggalili clan', 1965), Accession no. 1991.0024.4624 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'The Story of Wuradidi, the Spirit Woman', 1970), Accession no. 1991.0024.4624 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'The Giant Sea Creature'), Accession no. 1991.0024.4625 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'The Tree of Life'), and Accession no. 1985.0118.0011 (Narritjin Maymuru, 'Fight between Crocodile Man and Stingray Man', 1963).
- 59 The Groger-Wurm collection included five barks: Accession no. 1985.0112.0012 (painting of a Pukuman pattern), Accession no. 1985.0112.0030 (Deaf Tommy, painting of a Prukupali pattern, 1965), Accession no. 1985.0112.0032 (Deaf Tommy, painting of the sun at Wuriupi, 1956), Accession no. 1985.0112.0037 (painting of a central circle in a rectangle), and Accession no. 1985.0112.0040 (painting of a figure holding a raised spear and shield).
- 60 Accession nos. 1985.0153.042—The Painting by Ginginyirala depicts 'footprints, a Mimi-like figure and 2 human-like figures' and 1985.0153.043 -Painting by Dawulinyara, depicts '13 figures at corroboree, dilly bags and hunters'.
- 61 A potential exhibition of bark paintings in the USA was proposed, although no records exist of it having taken place. Barks proposed were Accession no. 1985.0118.0027 (Maam Spirit female, Artist Midjau-Midauru); Accession no. 1985.0118.0036 0038

- (Male mimi spirit—Artist Paddy Compass Namatbara), Accession no. 1985.0118.0041 (Paddy Compass Namatbara, 'Two Mimi spirits (males) dancing', 1963), Accession no. 1985.0118.0043 ('Two Mimi spirits (female) dancing'—Artist Paddy Compass Namatbara), and Accession no. 1985.0118.0036 (Butterfly, Artist—Midjau-Midauru).
- ⁶² For a chronological history of the Arnhem Land bark painting, refer to Geissler, Marie 2017.
- ⁶³ National Museum of Australia. OL 2004/0005. Dr. Helen Groger-Wurm collection No. 1985.0153; Willsteed, Theresa ed. 2004. *Crossing Country. The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art*. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
- ⁶⁴ Mundine, who worked as an art co-ordinator at Ramingining for many years, pioneered the development of contemporary bark production and exhibition. He curated the first significant exhibition of barks from Arnhem Land for the Power Institute at Sydney University in 1984 (The Institute became the Museum of Contemporary Art later on). It was titled *Objects and Representations from Ramingining: a Selection of Recent art from Arnhem Land*, and later exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, and purchased by this institution.
- ⁶⁵ Mundine noted that, in their 1983 display in a commercial exhibition in Sydney, the explanatory text from the artist that was placed alongside, was the one that had been included in the 1997 catalogue (Mundine 1997a, p. 155). He announced that many works from the 1983 exhibition had been sold to the National Gallery of Australia, along with several from David Malangi. Mundine added further insightful context through his translation of the artist Yilkari Kitani's artist's statement for the 1997 catalogue (Mundine 1997c, p. 153).
- ⁶⁶ The narrative relates to the encounter between human and animal ancestors, as well as its significance to the Yolngu understanding of the world. It provides the basis for their social life and ritual as expressed in ceremony and song, as well as laws that relate to authority, kinship, memory, and marriage. The two Wagilag Sisters are the key ancestral protagonists in this saga. The artists exhibited from the Groger-Wurm collection were Djulwarak Dawidi (Caruana and Lendon 1997, p. 46), Paddy Dhathangu (Caruana and Lendon 1997, p. 109), and Durndiwuy Wanambi (Caruana and Lendon 1997, p. 172). There were four other bark paintings from the NMA, three from the J.A. Davidson Collections, and one from the Mountford Collection (Caruana and Lendon 1997, pp. 45, 194, 108).
- ⁶⁷ Wannabe was discussing the Indigenous agency of the artist which was enacted through the bark paintings at the 2022 exhibition Mardayin, at the Kluge Ruhe Museum in the USA.
- ⁶⁸ Wanambi was commenting on the bark paintings at the 2022 exhibition 'Mardayin' at the Kluge-Ruhe Museum in the USA.
- ⁶⁹ Six Wandjina that belong to the Kangaroo totem people. Accession no. 1985.0173.0012.
- ⁷⁰ Other examples of Indigenous agency of the artists operating through the barks, but not discussed but identified within other NMA bark collections include the ecological agency of the barks of the Mul Kun Wirrpanda collection, which highlighted the traditional edible foods in the Yirrkala region, the political agency of the Yirrkala Bark Petition of 1963, which asserted the land title over Yolngu lands and legitimated the use of barks as legal instruments, the Dorothy Bennett Collection, which toured Japan in 1966 and promoted tourism to Australia, the Australian Aboriginal Arts Board Collection, which asserted the collective indigenous agency of the board which saw the collection toured and promoted to over 46 countries globally and viewed by over 10 million people, and the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collection, which highlighted the collective agency of many Indigenous institutions in commissioning and collecting over 2500 Indigenous artworks from all over Australia in the early years of the art movement. As such, it was the Indigenous of the collective that provided a critical historic overview of the diversity and changes in Indigenous art and its representation during the period of the formation of the Indigenous arts industry.

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