

Dr Ian Holland  
Secretary  
Australian Senate  
Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**A submission on Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector**

Dear Dr Holland,

I wish to make a brief submission to this inquiry based on my experience of 26 years working in the sector, initially as a curator of Australian Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Australia from 1980 to 2001 (from 1984 on as Senior Curator) with the responsibility to establish, develop, research, exhibit and promote a major public collection. Since 2002 I have been working as an independent curator and consultant on Indigenous art. In addition, I am the Senior Consultant on Aboriginal Art to the auction house, Sotheby's Australia, and I have a dealership with Michael Reid of Sydney which operates under the name Caruana & Reid Fine Art, specializing in Australian Indigenous art. I am also registered with the Department of the Arts as a valuer under the Cultural Gifts Program. In recent years I have also been a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Art History at the Australian National University.

The focus of my comments is on issues relating largely to the Indigenous art making communities outside the major urban areas of the country, and on general issues that I believe need to be considered in evaluating the current and future viability of the Indigenous visual arts sector.

In my opinion the past, current and future success of the market has been underpinned by the cultural integrity of the art produced for sale by Indigenous artists; this point cannot be emphasized enough. The art they produce for sale is fundamentally meaningful within the Indigenous context; it is not a watered-down version or a pale imitation of the culturally and ritually dictated traditional art forms which in most part continue to be practiced within Indigenous communities in many parts of remote Australia.

Equally, the art centre system model operating in communities is critical to the continuing success of this sector with its contribution to the continuation of cultural practice, and the social and economic development of communities. In so far as the art centres mediate between the needs and aspirations of artists within their communities and the public domain, a healthy and robust art centre system not only nurtures artists in the public sphere, but also ensures the appropriate and fair financial returns for individual artists, protects their rights as artists, and ensures the cultural

appropriateness of the method of engagement with the market. Art centres also guarantee the authenticity, correct documentation and provenance of works of art.

The provenance of works of art is a critical issue in terms of the continued viability of the sector, especially with regards to the growing secondary market. Whether collectors acquire work for investment or not, at some stage most collectors want to sell works. Unprovenanced or poorly provenanced works on the market devalue the standing of an artist, and undermine the potential for collectors, who in most cases had originally acquired works in good faith, to sell their work.

### **The current size and scale of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector.**

The Indigenous visual arts and crafts sector constitutes a significant proportion of the Australian art market in general. While the figures on the dollar value of the market vary, there is little doubt that as a whole this sector makes a substantial contribution to the Indigenous economy and to a lesser degree, the general economy. I wish to draw attention to a number of issues relevant of the market. The size and continued growth of the market has implications for the sustainability of artists and art communities, and the private commercial galleries and dealers/agents who are their representatives in the marketplace – as well as local and regional economies, and the export dollar. With regard to commercial galleries, it is worth noting over the last decade the ever-increasing number of mainstream private galleries who previously did not show Indigenous art and have added individual Indigenous artists or art centres to their stables. In addition, the service and ancillary industries connected to the sector from picture framers to conservators to transport companies and tourism operators etc. are also affected by the viability of the sector.

The market is stratified, ranging from the tourism sector, one-off buyers, home decorators, small time and small budget collectors, the +/- \$10,000 collector, collecting groups, investors, superannuation investors, specialist collectors (those who only collect one artist, one community or one type of object eg. early Papunya boards or woven objects), corporate collectors, major art collectors with large budgets, museums and overseas collectors. An acute awareness of the different levels of art and craft production allows for improved targeting of markets, more cost effective practices, and improved returns to the artists and crafts people.

### **The economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector;**

The sector provides major and direct economic, social and cultural benefits to Indigenous artists and their communities. On the cultural level, the practice of art making within communities is part of the continuum of ceremonial practice, reinforcing people's connection with traditional lands, ancestral beliefs and ritual. It also provides opportunities for the transmission and reinforcement of cultural knowledge to younger members of the community.

On the social level, participation in the art market reinforces social structures within the local community while giving artists a voice in the wider community to whom they can communicate their beliefs, values and aspirations. This has proven to be a significant factor in the greater understanding and appreciation of Indigenous culture and society in the public domain.

In many of the smaller communities, the sale of art forms an integral, if not the major part of the local economy. Indeed it has been my experience from visiting numerous communities that when the art centre system is working well, with the consequent improved levels of income from art and craft sales, and the distribution of income within the community, the level of social disfunction in terms of domestic violence, alcoholism, petrol-sniffing and other social ills diminishes.

### **The current and likely future priority infrastructure needs of the sector.**

The most pressing infrastructure needs relate to issues facing art centres, which underpin the viability of the sector. There include:

- The ability to attract workers with appropriate levels of professionalism, experience and knowledge of the art world and Indigenous culture, through improved working conditions and support mechanisms, and training. The demands on art centre workers on a day to day basis are little appreciated outside Indigenous communities.
- Increased support for umbrella organizations such as Desart and ANKAAA to allow them to operate more effectively in representing and addressing the needs of art centres and communities.
- The financial systems operating in art centres require a degree of flexibility in order to respond effectively to the needs of artists faced with demands and competition from outside forces.
- Government patronage should extend to as many art communities as possible, and while it is sensible to reward successful art centres, equally there is an imperative to support and assist those less successful as artists in the latter communities may well be the most vulnerable to dishonest traders or agents.

### **Opportunities for strategies and mechanisms that the sector could adopt to improve its practices, capacity and sustainability, including to deal with unscrupulous or unethical conduct.**

Unscrupulous and unethical conduct in the market has come about as a result of a number of factors: the burgeoning popularity of Indigenous art has been seen as an opportunity for a 'gold rush'; the buying public's knowledge and understanding of Indigenous art, artists and the role art centres play is generally poor; the level of inquiry or research undertaken by a potential buyer is often minimal; the ability to offer works at less than market value when the art centre is by-passed as the returns to the artist are usually well below accepted, customary percentages; and in some cases, especially for more successful artists or communities, demand exceeds supply.

In my opinion, an emphasis on provenance of a work of art would ameliorate the potential for unscrupulous dealing. In all other sectors of the art industry world-wide, provenance is the most significant attribute – other than artistic and aesthetic merit – that a work of art can possess. Proper provenance gives all concerned, the artist, agent and collector peace of mind.

In the ever increasing secondary market, where the work of certain artists is now

commercially on a par with some of the most sought-after non-Indigenous artists, the introduction of *droite de suite*, or re-sale royalties, may yet be another avenue to improve conduct within the sector as a whole. Given the rapid escalation in the value of many Indigenous artists' work, the granting of *droite de suite* may be seen as a moral imperative. Given the complicated nature of administering such a system, consideration may be given to aligning resale royalties with Business Activity Statements sought by the Taxation Department.

### **Developing international markets.**

The overseas market is one of the most important factors in the continued viability of the sector. While it is widely acknowledged that Indigenous Australian art is growing in popularity overseas, this seems to apply mainly to the lower to middle ranges of the sector. Greater effort needs to be put into convincing major international collectors of art of the quality and relevance of Indigenous Australian art. One of the reasons for this seems to be that the categorization of Indigenous Australian art continues to be problematic in cultural terms outside Australia – is it ethnographica and hence belonging in museums of social and cultural history, or is it modern or contemporary art and therefore belonging in the public and private museums of such art across the world? The distinction has been dealt with within Australia as evidenced by the prominence of Indigenous art on the commercial gallery circuit and in the collections and programs of most major public art institutions in this country. The best of Indigenous art needs to be exhibited and promoted in the contexts of the best international modern and contemporary art as seen in the collections of institutions such as the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, and museums of contemporary art both public and private which are found in most major cities in the northern hemisphere. Such institutions require rationales for including Indigenous Australian art within their collecting and exhibiting policies, however should they be seen to actively engage with Australian Indigenous art then they are more likely to influence a greater number of art collectors overseas to do the same. Australia's current legislation on the export of movable cultural heritage will continue to protect this country's most significant cultural assets.

In conclusion, I am grateful for the opportunity to submit my comments to the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Wally Caruana  
27 November 2006