The social and cultural benefits of Indigenous visual arts
as per section (b) of the Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous visual arts sector's terms of reference

Written for the
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board
Australia Council

By

Terri Janke
Solicitor Director
Terri Janke and Company Pty Ltd

Last update: 20 October 2006

Notice: members of the Indigenous community are respectfully advised that a number of Indigenous people noted in this paper have passed away.

Contents

1. Introduction

The Indigenous visual arts sector provides many social and cultural benefits for Indigenous people and Australia. Indigenous artists and craftspeople enhance their cultures through the practice of their visual arts, which in turn contribute to the improvement of Indigenous people's lives. Indigenous visual artists also contribute to the wealth of Australia's cultural life.

This essay contributes to the Australia Council's submission to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector* and reports on the term of reference relating to the social and cultural benefits of the Indigenous visual arts sector. The following social and cultural benefits will be examined:-

a) Keeping culture strong
    - Cultural maintenance – guarding the integrity of cultural traditions
    - Cultural development and artistic diversity
    - Identity and connection
b) Affirmation of Indigenous land/sea connection
    - Asserting rights to land and native title claims
c) Providing a forum for an Indigenous voice
    - Providing a political voice
    - Cultural education – recording Indigenous practices
    - Recording history
d) Uniting Indigenous people
    - Cultural events - networks
    - Arts centres and arts organisations as cultural hubs
e) Developing new market opportunities
    - Commission opportunities
    - Collaborations and licensing
    - International focus
f) Improvement of the lives of Indigenous people
    - Rising incomes improve lifestyles
    - Tourism and advertising
g) Health and well-being
    - Health education and healing
    - Art in prisons
    - Indigenous women
    - Accessible arts and engaging all ages – young and old.

2. Keeping culture strong

2.1 Cultural maintenance

The growth of the Indigenous visual arts sector has provided the benefit of cultural maintenance to many Indigenous peoples, communities and individuals. Australia's Indigenous cultures are among the oldest living cultures. By drawing on this cultural heritage, Indigenous artists and craftspeople strengthen their cultures through the practice of their visual arts.

The visual arts funding and programming provided in the Indigenous visual arts sector has allowed cultural expression to strengthen and develop. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board "assists Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to claim, control and enhance their cultural inheritance."[1]

The visual arts sector has facilitated the handing down of information and skills from generations. Along with this comes the reinforcement of cultural obligations such as the honouring of traditional styles. Artists engage with elders to learn important cultural stories. For example, the Torres Strait Islander artist Dennis Nona trail blazed the development of linocut prints unique to the Torres Strait. After learning his artistic skills at the Far North Queensland Institute of TAFE, he worked with respected elders including Ephraim Bani. With cultural permission, he visually depicted Torres Strait stories, which had only ever been told by story or in dance. Nona's prints included the entire story with the character and events in the one work. He also introduced a matrix of delicately lined clan patterning that bound the entire story to its place of origin. Nona forged a contemporary Torres Strait Art Movement and thereby reinvigorated Torres Strait culture.[2]

Another art project that keeps culture strong is the local community project *Don't forget the old ways - Bring them back to life*. Groote Eylandt and Bickerton Island Enterprises Aboriginal Corporation worked together on a project to enhance

[1] Australia Council, *Support for the arts handbook 2006*, Sydney, 2006, p 20.
[2] Sylvia Kleinert & Marg Neale, *Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, Author biography, p.664; The Australian Print Network, Author biography on Aboriginal prints Australia, http://www.aboriginalartprints.com.au/ab_dennisnona.cfm,, viewed 11 October 2006.

Groote Eylandt artistic tradition by the passing on of traditional art and crafts from the elders of Groote Eylandt to younger members of their community.[3]

2.2 Promoting artistic diversity

The expression of Indigenous visual arts continues to promote the diversity of Indigenous cultural groups. On colonisation there were approximately 250 distinct Indigenous language groups,[4] each with different traditions. The impact of colonisation has shaped different experiences. Indigenous visual arts has been a means for clans and regions to express this, and develop their own diversity. After all, Indigenous culture is diverse and alive, it is not static. In the 1970s, many of the arts producing communities in the Kimberley, Arnhemland and Central Desert regions produced art based on local rock art traditions and ceremonial performances. Today, there is a very wide range of visual arts practices that Indigenous artists engage in. For example:-

Acrylics on canvas	Warlayirti Artists (Balgo Hills, WA)
Painting	Julie Dowling (Badinaya/Yamatji, WA), Judy Watson (Waanyi Clan, QLD)
Bark painting	John Mawurndjul (Kurulk Clan, NT)
Printmaking	Dennis Nona (Badu Island, Torres Strait), Banduk Marika (Yirrkala, NT)
Fabric Printing	Rosie Barkus (Muralag, TSI), Nagula Jarndu (Broome, WA)
Pottery	Thancoupie (QLD), Hermannsburg Potters (NT)
Ceramics	Walkatjara Art Uluru (Uluru, NT), Girwaawa Ceramics (Grafton, NSW)
Glassmaking	Wathaurong Glass and Arts Pty Ltd (North Geelong, VIC), Warburton Arts (Warburton, WA)
Sculpture	Wik and Kugu Art Centre (Aurukun, QLD)
Basket-making	Maningrida Arts and Culture (Maningrida, NT); Yvonne Koolmatrie (Ngarrindjeri, SA)

[3] Australia Council media release, 'Keeping culture strong', http://www.ozco.gov.au/news_and_hot_topics/news/keeping_indigenous_culture_strong/, viewed 11 October 2006.

[4] Patrick McConvell and Nicholas Thieberger, 'Languages past and present' in Bill Arthur and Frances Morphy (eds), *Macquarie atlas of Indigenous Australia*, The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, Sydney, 2005, p. 78.

Shellwork	Esme Timbery (La Perouse, NSW); Lola Greeno (Tasmania)
Photography	Michael Riley (Wiradjuri/Gamilaroi, NSW), Merv Bishop (Brewarrina, NSW), Tracey Moffatt (QLD)
Media arts	Jenny Fraser (Yugambeh/Mununjali, QLD), Brenda L Croft (Gurindji people, WA), Destiny Deacon (K'ua K'ua and Erub/Mer peoples, QLD)
Jewellery	Saltwater Collection (Cairns, QLD); Tiwi Design Aboriginal Corporation (Tiwi Islands, NT)
Woodwork	Maruku Arts (Ayers Rock, NT)
Rugs	Kaltjiti Arts and Crafts (via Alice Springs, NT).

2.3 Cultural development

As noted by Djon Mundine, 'Until the 1970s bark paintings remained, with the boomerang and the didgeridoo, the most identifiable sign of Aboriginality and the single Aboriginal-created object to approach *art* in Western eyes. As with nearly all Aboriginal art, paintings are usually personal and event-oriented. A painter traditionally works with subject matter specifically related to his own history, spiritual connection and role in particular rituals.'[5] Mundine notes that it was not until the 20th Century that bark paintings were preserved beyond their viewing time, although the first bark paintings recorded were found in Tasmania in 1800 – 04, New South Wales around 1800s and Victorian in the 1830s. Mundine points out that it is in the north of Australia, especially in Arnhemland where the bark painting traditional flourished. In the 1870s barks from Arnhemland were first exhibited work in Sydney and were at that time appreciated as ethnography. In the last 30 years, bark painting has crossed to fine arts appreciation. Mundine's article *Bark painter of Arnhemland* reflects on the life of Jimmy Wululu, bark painter from Arnhemland who was the first generation to take barks to this next stage. Wululu used a ruler to measure and draw property, and moved from 'picture painting' to 'story painting' in a minimalist style, however, his base was founded in tradition.

> "All those big people they al l died and I was passed down the painting from them; they taught me and that's how I know.'[6]

[5] Djon Mundine, 'Jimmy Wululu (1936 - 2005) Bark painter from Arnhemland, *Art Monthly Australia*, March 2006, pp 27 – 29 at 27.

[6] Jimmy Wululu in conversation with Jeanne Ryckmans, SBS TV, 1993 as cited by Djon Mundine, ibid, p. 29.

Yvonne Koolmatrie saw little evidence of her cultural practices of her ancestors whilst she was growing up. In 1982, at a weaving workshop, she learned the critical first stage of Ngarrindjeri weaving, and was instructed in the correct harvesting and preparation of sedge grass. Koolmatrie began to practice the weaving technique and gradually to experiment with form. The Art Gallery of New South Wales Indigenous art publication, *Tradition today* explains Koolmatrie's artistic objectives:

> 'For Koolmatrie, the near loss of Ngarrindjeri weaving tradition crystallized a twofold responsibility: to pass on her skills and to create work of the highest possible standards so that her fibre forms will endure for future generations.'[7]

2.4 Developing cultural infrastructure

Indigenous visual arts infrastructure has developed to support Indigenous visual arts production. Aboriginal arts centres are (almost all) Indigenous owned and controlled, operated by an all Indigenous committee. This structure of Indigenous governance recognizes the communal aspect of ownership, whilst also recognizing individual artists' creative contributions. This cultural infrastructure serves as the link between individuals and community, where senior artists can provide advice and training to developing artists to ensure the integrity of clan owed images that incorporated into artist's works.

2.5 Identity and connection to family

The visual arts are a means by which Indigenous people express and explore their identity and connection to family. Judy Watson (Waanyi clan of North Western Queensland) is an internationally celebrated artist, having won awards such the 1995 Moët & Chandon Fellowship and participating in the 1997 Australian exhibit at the Venice Biennale. Judy Watson is the recipient of the 2006 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award. Watson's paintings and prints are inspired by country, its many moods and oral history. In 1990 Judy Watson was

[7]Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Tradition today, Indigenous art in Australia*, AGSW, Sydney, 2004 p. 62.

able to fulfil her life-long dream of researching her Aboriginal heritage by travelling to her grand-mother's country of north-west Queensland.

> 'I listen and hear those words a hundred years away that is my Grandmother's Mother's country; it seeps down through blood and memory and soaks into the ground.'[8]

3. Indigenous spiritual connection to land

> "The paintings and patterns come from the land. Dancing comes from the land. Names come from the land. The traditional ochres come from the land. Stories come from the land. Sacred ceremonies come from the land. The land belongs to our ancestors and now the clans and the tribes."[9]

Visual art is an expression of belonging and connection with long ago traditions and spiritual beliefs. The painting of creation and dreaming stories is a manifestation of this cultural and spiritual expression. Expressions of Indigenous visual art, like other forms of art, depict an ongoing connection and relationship with land and sea. In this way, art is like a clan motifs or insignia representing legal custodianship. This relationship was explored in the Federal Court case *Bulun Bulun v R & T Textiles*[10]. The artist John Bulun Bulun describes his arts connection to land, and his culture:-

> 'The creation of artworks such as `at the Waterhole' is part of my responsibility in fulfilling the obligations I have as a traditional Aboriginal owner of Djulibinyamurr. I am permitted by my law to create this artwork, but it is also my duty and responsibility to create such words, as part of my traditional Aboriginal land ownership obligation. A painting such as this is not separate from my rights in my land. It is a part of my bundle of rights in the land and must be produced in accordance with Ganalbingu custom and

---

[8] Judy Watson, cited in Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (compiled by Marion Demozay), *Gatherings: Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art from Queensland Australia*, Keeaira Press, Southport, QLD, 2001, p. 204.

[9] A statement made by members of the Association of Northern and Kimberley Artists of Australia to the Indigenous Reference Group meeting in 1996 cited in Terri Janke, *Our culture: our future*, p. 110.

[10] *Bulun Bulun v R & T Textiles* (1998)41 IPR 513 at 518.

> law. Interference with the painting or another aspect of the Madayin associated with Djulibinyamurr is tantamount to interference with the land itself as it is an essential part of the legacy of the land, it is like causing harm to the spirit found in the land, and causes us sorrow and hardship. The land is the life force of our people. It sustains and nurtures us, as it has done for countless generations. We are very troubled by harm caused to the carrying out of the rituals which are such essential part of the management of our land, like the making of paintings or performances of ceremony. It is very important that ceremonies are carried out precisely as directed by Barnda, and that the ceremonies are respected.'[11]

Galarruway Yunupingu has claimed that the unauthorized use of Aboriginal motifs is a form of assimilation that will effectively destroy Aboriginal communities:

> 'They are using the same old tactics of assimilation, except this time they are trying to assimilate our culture into their world because it is fashionable in their eyes and will make money. ... [W]e will survive these attempts to wipe out our peoples. ... Just as our struggle for land is still strong, so is our fight to maintain and revive our culture, for our land and our culture are indivisible from our lives.'[12]

Gawirrin Gumana speaks in the video *Copyrites* about his reaction to seeing his dreaming story, copied from his artwork onto a dress. He says "they stole my backbone."[13] Such a story is common for many Indigenous people who see their works taken in this way. The reaction of the artists from the copyright case – Banduk Marika (Yirrkala, NT) was appalled by the reproduction of her artwork Djanda and the Sacred Waterhole which depicted her Rirratingu clan's creation place. She said "(t)he reproduction of the image on carpet has caused me great

---

[11] John Bulun Bulun in his affidavit evidence as cited in the case judgment: *Bulun Bulun v R & T Textiles* (1998)41 IPR 513 at 518.

[12] G. Yunupingu, 'The Black/White Conflict' in Vivien Johnson, *Copyrites: Aboriginal Art in the e age of reproductive technologies, Touring Exhibition 1996 Catalogue*, National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association (NIAAA) and Macquarie University, Sydney, 1996, p. 55.

[13] *Copyrites*, 1998, a documentary film produced by Cathy Eatock & Kim Mordaunt, distributed by Marcom Projects.

distress because I believe it desecrates the story which is partly told by the imagery in waterhole
artwork."[14]

It is stealing identity – and leaves artists feeling violated. In fact, the artist's ability to do something about the copyright infringements, by taking action in the Federal court to stop the unauthorized production of the work, restored their standing in the community. The story of the carpets case itself became a cultural reclamation story, adding further cultural value. It restored their respect, and then allowed them to continue to engage in the commercial marketplace.

3.1 Asserting rights to land

In 1963, the Bark Petition bark painting was made showing the clan designs of all the areas that were threatened by mining. As Galarrwuy Yunupingu explains, 'it was not just a series of pictures but represented the title to our country under our law.'[15]

The Barunga Statement presented to then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, in 1988 is a good example of the role of art in providing a means for Indigenous people to assert their rights. The Barunga Statement was presented by the Central Land council and the Northern Land Council, a statement in the centre framed by the paintings of Arnhem Land artists and central desert artists. The text called on the government to negotiate a treaty recognizing prior ownership.[16]

3.2 Native title claims

Art allowed Indigenous claimants to express their relationships to their lands. The Walmajarra and Wangkajunga people are the traditional owners of the Great Sandy Desert. When preparing for a land claim the problems of how to bridge the gap between legal language and European worldviews created a problem. As

[14] Banduk Marika, Affidavit, 1994 as cited in Terri Janke, *Minding cultures*, World Intellectual Property organisation, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 12.
[15] Howard Morphy, 'Art and politics: The Bark Petition and the Barunga Statement' pp 100 - 102 in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal art and culture*,Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p.100.
[16] *Ibid*, p 102.

a solution the claimants resolved they would paint it. Each claimant painting the piece of country they had a special responsibility towards. The canvas depicts patterns of land ownership and relations between deferent groups within the Ngurrara native title area. Some of the claimants were established artists, such as Ngarralja Tommy May and Helicopter Jungarrayi and Elizabeth Nyumi, but others had never painted before. As the catalogue *Native Title Business* (edited by Joan G Winter) describes:

> 'The claims who accompanied the canvas to Pirnini included established artists, new ones, as well as people who had never painted before. These last kept a close eye on the work of the artists, sometimes offering comments and directions, while a few became so caught up in the process that they took up a brush for the first time in order to paint in their own parts of the country. The average age was over 60.'[17]

Hence, in a short space of time, 'painting had shifted from a curious practice to a powerful political tool.'[18]

Peter Skipper, artist, and native title claimant noted:

> "That big canvas is very important. It is wangarr and mangi. The stories and the bodies of our old people are in their country, our country. We wanted to make kartiya [Europeans] understand our ownership of our country. Bulldozers come into our country. They grade the road right through these places, through those bodies. When the mining company takes the earth away they pull out the mangi and take it to another place. That's why we are fighting for our country, to keep the mangi." [19]

4. Providing a forum for an Indigenous voice

Visual art provides a forum for Indigenous voice. It has been useful for expressing political commentary on issues that affect Indigenous people.

---

[17] 'Painting a claim,' Gang Land Council (Aboriginal Corporation) *Native title business: Contemporary Indigenous art*, Keeaira Press, Southport Queensland, 2002, p.66.
[18] *Ibid*. p. 66.
[19] Peter Skipper as cited in *Ibid*, on p.66.

4.1 Political voice

The role of visual arts exhibitions in creating a voice for Indigenous political expression is also well established. Boomalli Aboriginal Artists for example, held an exhibition in April entitled *Mining Sacred Ground*. This collaborative exhibition was conducted by the Mineral Policy Institute, Boomalli Aboriginal Artist Co-operative and activists, artists and elders from mine-affected Aboriginal communities in N.S.W. The exhibition provides a forum for Aboriginal artists in NSW Aboriginal communities to explore and express the impacts of mining upon their cultures, communities and lands. *Mining Sacred Ground* features significant works from the Wiradjuri Nation, where the Lake Cowal mine is proposed in what is the sacred heartland of the Wiradjuri people, and from the Yuwalaraay and Gamilaroi nations around Lightning Ridge, where an expansion of existing opal mines threatens burial grounds, dreaming tracks and cultural heritage around Narran Lakes, a traditional meeting place for various clans across the region.[20] The success of the show is noted by Matthew Poll, Artistic Director of Boomalli, 'The show was well received and 14 works were sold. The artists from Lightning Ridge were so pleased to have a show in Sydney.'[21]

Social injustice is another main theme of Indigenous art. As Wally Caruana notes, "The quest for equality and justice with Australian society as a whole has been a resonant recurring theme in the work of the first wave of urban Aboriginal artists."[22] For example, Brenda L Croft's photograph 'Michael Watson in Redfern on the Long march of Freedom, Justice and Hope, Invasion Day, 26 January 1988, Sydney, NSW 1988' focuses on the Bicentenary protests.

Other social and political issues covered by Indigenous artists include:-

- Stolen Generation (for example, Julie Dowling's *Icon to a stolen child: teacher 1999* refers to the Stolen generations of Aboriginal children who were taken from their parents and put into orphanages and homes.[23])

---

[20] http://www.mpi.org.au/campaigns/indigenous/sacred_ground/

[21] Telephone attendance on Matthew Poll, Artistic Director, Boomalli Aboriginal Artist Cooperative, 16 October 2006.

[22] Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal art* (new edition), Thames & Hudson world of art, UK, 2003, p 211.

[23] Luke Taylor, 'The Visual arts" in *Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia*, The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, Sydney, 2005, pp124 – 125.

- Aboriginal deaths in custody (for example, Robert Campbell Jnr, *Death in Custody*, 1987[24])
- Land rights (examples as discussed above).

4.2 Recording history

Visual artists use arts as a means to record history and Indigenous lifestyles – often an Indigenous history not told in the history books. Examples include Ian Abdulla of the Ngarrindjeri people of the Riverland region in rural South Australia. Ian's paintings depict images of his youth spent on the Murray River – fishing and gathering yabbies, and working in the farming industry.[25] The Art Gallery of NSW describes his work as follows:

> 'Abdulla's hand painted annotations are placed dead centre at the top of his paintings, bringing a personal inflection to his stories. His experiences are shared by many Aboriginal people dispossessed of their land and marginalised into a life of seasonal work and scavenging.'[26]

4.3 Recording cultural practices

Visual art is used to record Indigenous cultural practices including food collection and preparation (eg: turtle hunting; honey ant collection), making craft and implements such as tools and canoes, ceremonies (including funeral scenes), and body markings.

5. Uniting Indigenous people

5.1 Cultural events

Visual art has also played a role in uniting Indigenous people with each other. Arts events such as exhibition and forums are Indigenous community events for

[24] NSW Board of Studies, *Affirmations of Identity – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual artists resource kit, NSW Artists*, NSW Board of Studies, Sydney, 2000, p. 19.
[25] Ibid, p. 124.
[26] AGNSW, *Tradition Today*, *op cit*, p. 22.

Indigenous people to network, and engage culturally and socially. Such events also provide a sense of pride for people.

5.2 Arts centres and organisations are cultural hubs

In Indigenous communities, arts centres are hubs of activity. Arts centres are points of contact for spreading information about arts and community events. This is the case for rural communities such as Bula'bula arts in Ramingining, Northern Territory. As Louise Partos, Manager notes, the Art Centre provides "social cultural and economic support for members in the variety of ways. She says the art centre supports members not just in visual arts, but also in performing arts. They have a number of artists who are in bands, and also dance. There is also the film work. The arts centre was the hub for arts projects but also for the film projects, *Ten canoes*[27]. Bula'bula arts represents over 400 artists including deceased artists' estates. There are about 75 active artists which use the centre on a day to day basis. Arts centre are contact points for Indigenous artists for intellectual property rights including royalties payments and superannuation. [28]

In urban areas, Indigenous visual arts community organisations also have strong social and cultural functions. In Sydney, the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative, established in 1987, has a cohesive role in bringing the Indigenous community together for functions and special events. Boomalli is a multi-purpose cultural centre. In the past such events and exhibitions have included ANTAR Social Justice events, acoustic events, dance parties, International Women's Day, Youth arts workshops, and *the Pink, the Black, the Beautiful* – an exhibition coinciding with the Sydney Mardi Gras 2006.[29]

Indigenous visual arts centres and organisations also connect agencies, government departments and local authorities with Indigenous artists for commissions. They usually operate with limited staff and resources. To lose them would create a vacuum within Indigenous communities given their importance in keeping Indigenous communities strong.

[27] A feature film produced by Rolf de Heer, Peter Djigirr and the people of Ramingining, 2006.
[28] Telephone attendance on Louise Partos, Manager, Bula'bula Arts, 16 October 2006.
[29] Telephone attendance on Matthew Poll, Artistic Director, Boomalli Aboriginal Artist Cooperative, 16 October 2006.

5.3 International indigenous connections

Visual art has also provided the opportunities for Indigenous artists to work internationally as guests of other Indigenous peoples, and to also collaborate and exchange ideas with other world Indigenous peoples.

In 2001, a cultural exchange program between Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-Operative and Urban Shaman Inc (Winnipeg, Canada) involved artists from both institutions visiting their host country for a period of three weeks resulting in an exhibition tilted *blanketed* which discussed the relationship of the two Indigenous cultures.

In 2001, a cross cultural exchange project took Indigenous Australian Artist to Canada to work with Canadian Dene Artist, John Sabourin and Indigenous Australian Artist Both artists exchanged techniques of working in sculpture with stone and wood. In 2002, an exhibition *Our legends* was held in Sydney.[30]

Jenny Fraser, Indigenous media artist was selected for the first International Indigenous Art Residency at the Banff Art Centre in Canada in 2004. [31]

6. Developing market opportunities

In 2002, John Altman estimated that the national value of Indigenous visual arts sales is between $100 million and $300 million.[32] John Altman notes this success has been rapid in the past 30 years:

> 'In the early 1970s, Indigenous visual arts were regarded as largely ethnographic, 'tribal curios'; now at the beginning of the 21st

[30]ABC Messagestick, "Our Legends -The Great Cross Cultural Exchange Australian and Canadian Aboriginal Art", http://www.abc.net.au/message/blackarts/visual/s710784.htm, viewed 16 October 2006.
[31] Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, *Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, p. 275.
[32] J C Altman, *Cultural funding in Australia: Three tiers of Government 1999 – 2000*, Cultural Ministers Council Statistics Working Group, Canberra, cited in J C Altman, 'Developing an Indigenous Arts strategy for the Northern Territory: Issues paper for consultations', Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 2003, Canberra, p. 9.

> Century this art has evolved to a point where it is nationally and internationally recognised as an exceptional fine art movement. Today, some individual Indigenous artists have a profile, within their own lifetimes, in the secondary fine arts market and internationally. Arguably, this rapid transformation of ethnographic to fine art and the Indigenous visual arts penetration of global fine arts markets is unprecedented anywhere—the 1980s acceptance of Indigenous art as contemporary fine art was a breakthrough."[33]

The economic successes have increased opportunities for Indigenous artists.

6.1 National focus generates commission opportunities

Indigenous art has generated a national reputation and many Australians recognise Indigenous art as a signifier of Indigenous culture. Further the increasing recognition of Indigenous visual arts as a unique identifier of Australia has lead for art to be used in advertising and tourism. For example, Qantas airlines has three jets painted with Aboriginal art. Rene Kulitja, a Mututjulu artist worked with Balarinji for the commission of the fuselage layout. The design uses individual motifs painted by Rene Kulitja whose vibrant colours are inspired by the dramatic landscape surrounding Uluru.[34]

Other Indigenous artists such as Darwin's Gullawun (Roque) Lee and Tennant Creek's Ruth Dawson were selected for commissioned art for Freightlink's locomotives - Kurra Kurraka (Lee) and Purnu (Dawson).[35]

Another example is June Smith (Keringke Arts, NT)) whose artistic work was commissioned for the floor carpet at Alice Springs airport. June Smith collaborated with an interior colour designer and a carpet manufacturer to create the design from her paintings. The *Alice Springs News* reported in April 2006 that

---

[33] Professor Jon Altman. *An Indigenous arts strategy for the Northern Territory: Recommended framework* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra, http://www.dcdsca.nt.gov.au/dcdsca/intranet.nsf/Files/CA_ArtsNT_Pubs/$file/RecFramework.pdf#search=%22%22cultural%20benefits%22%20and%20%22indigenous%20art%22%22

[34]Qantas, 'Yananyi Dreaming", http://www.qantas.com.au/info/about/company/flyingArt, viewed 16 October 2006.

[35]Australasia Railways Corporation, 'Locomotive artists from the outback', http://www.aarc.com.au/aarc/info/FreightLink_combined_releases.pdf, viewed 16 October 2006

"(t)he carpet makes a bold statement of Aboriginal culture and creativity associated with Alice Springs as a destination.'[36]

These examples illustrate where Indigenous artists have benefits from the national reputation of their art, and entered into commercial arrangements with the relevant entities, thereby further allowing Indigenous art and culture to be showcased. However, there is a problem in some cases where Indigenous art is used in tourism or advertising. In this case it is stylised Indigenous art that is used, which is not produced by Indigenous artists. This reduces the potential income of artists, and also promotes a less than authentic product.

6.2 Developing collaborations

Kaltjiti Arts and Crafts in Fregon, is one of the arts centres from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands in far north-west South Australia. The Kaltjiti Artists have been involved in a cross-cultural project for the past ten years. It is a partnership between the Fregon Indigenous artists and a family owned handicrafts business in Srinagar, the remote Himalayan capital of Kashmir. The collaboration makes a collection of lacquer ware boxes, handmade cushions and chain stitch rugs. The original designs are created by the artists at Kaltjiti and are applied to these traditional Kashmiri handicrafts. The project benefits both communities socially by offering employment opportunities. For Fregon artists it offers learning new skills, maximizing sales by exploiting intellectual property in appropriate ways, contributing in a global exchange – learning about new cultures – and offers opportunities of future autonomy and self-sustainability.[37] As Carolyn Wilson, coordinator of the project notes:

> "Unlike most arts centres engages in applied design manufacturing enterprises, Katjiti Arts focuses on ownership and does not (as a rule) license its images to third parties. This magnifies the advantages to the community and is an empowering way to work with intellectual property. Local control being maintained over quality, selection and the arts centre's profile and 'brand-name'."[38]

---

[36] Kieran Finnane, 'Alice Springs airport get Aboriginal theme', Alice Springs News, 6 April 2006, http://www.alicespringsnews.com.au/1314.html, viewed 16 October 2006.
[37] Carolyn Wilson, 'Kaltjiti Arts and Crafts', *Art Monthly*, No 186. December 2005 – February 2006, pp 36 – 38.
[38] *Ibid*, p 37.

Similar opportunities exist for other arts centres, however, the proliferation of Indigenous-stylized imported products reduces the ability of artists to enter into collaboration licensing arrangements. Further, there is a need for education and awareness raising relating to licensing of intellectual property.

6.3 International focus

Indigenous art has gained an international audience and thereby promotes a greater understanding of Indigenous cultures worldwide. For Indigenous people this instills enormous pride and wellbeing to see their art gain world wide audiences in Germany, the United States and France.

In 1993, *Aratjara*, was the first exhibition of Aboriginal art to tour Germany. The exhibition was a great success in Dusseldorf. It traveled to England and Sweden, and over 255,000 people in Europe saw it. Since then there has been ongoing interest in Indigenous art by German people.

In June 2006, the Musée du quai Branly, in Paris France, showcased the art of eight Indigenous artists – incorporated into the fabric of the building. This generated enormous pride for the Indigenous artists and Indigenous people generally. At the Paris opening the artist, Gulumbu Yunipingu – spoke of her immense pride in being associated with the project. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, "She cried as she spoke publicly about her ceiling of painted starts on Monday. 'This building is a bridge between Australia and France,' she said. 'Your stars are like ours. It made me feel at home.'[39]

7. Improving the lives of Indigenous people

7.1 Better incomes improve lifestyles

The income potential for individual Indigenous artists from the sale of visual arts and the income from copyright royalties can provide an income for Indigenous people. Arts production can increase the amount of money within families and communities and thereby reduce welfare dependency. However, there needs to be advice to Indigenous artists about the money issues related to arts production,

[39] Cynthia Banham, 'Chirac's distant view', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 – 25 June 2006, p. 29.

and arts centres play a fundamental role in this. Some financial issues requiring further education and awareness raising. Of note are issues such as taxation issues (including GST and income tax); contracts and legal information; contracts between arts centres and artists and gallery – artist contracts.

There are sufficient examples to show that the sale of visual arts has already raised sufficient funds for improving the lives of Indigenous people. For example, Indigenous art exhibitions and auctions have been used to buy kidney dialysis machines and scholarships for Indigenous psychologists.[40]

7.2 Tourism

According to recent surveys undertaken in the Tourism Research Australia, over 129 000 international visitors purchased Indigenous art or craft in the quarter ending March 2006.[41] International visitors purchased Indigenous art or craft at Retail shops (62% of visitors), Galleries (16%), and Festivals or markets (15%). A total expenditure of $11.5 million for the quarter was spent by international visitors on Indigenous arts or craft for the March 2006 quarter alone.[42]

It is clear therefore that overseas tourists want experience and access to buy art products but authentic art products. The access the authentically produced items from Indigenous artists is complicated by the proliferation of overseas ripoffs being passed off as authentic or 'Aboriginal-style'. Not only do these items rob Indigenous artists of incomes, and reduce the value of authentically produced items, they deny international tourists access to the real products. A petition email created by Creative Economy calls for the Australian Consumer Competition Commission to ban the use of "Aboriginal style" to describe non-authentic Indigenous product. Creative Economy estimated about 90% of product sold in retail as Aboriginal product or "Aboriginal Style" is non-authentic product, and all too often this product is imported into Australia. "This confusion in the marketplace undermines the integrity of authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander products, threatens the viability of genuine retailers and greatly impinges on the incomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

[40] For example, the APS Bendi Lango Art Exhibition held in August 2006.
[41] Darrian Collins, Principal Analyst, Tourism Research Australia, *Paper at Australian Indigenous Tourism Conference 2006*, Alice Springs, 19th-22nd September 2006.
[42] Soula Middleton 'Tourists seek Indigenous experience', *The Koori Mail*, 11 October 2006.

A ban of imports of Aboriginal product and the abolition of the term "Aboriginal Style" would decrease the amount of non-authentic Aboriginal product and greatly increase the opportunities for authentic Aboriginal product to enter the marketplace. In turn, economic returns from Aboriginal products should flow to Aboriginal and Torres Strait people. It will increase consumer confidence and restore integrity in authentic Aboriginal product.[43]

8. Health and wellbeing

Indigenous people still suffer appalling health, low life expectancy, high unemployment and discrimination. The visual arts have been a way for artists to explore this, and to work towards improving health standards through education, and raising awareness.

8.1 Health education

The visual arts have been used to educate Indigenous people about health issues from at least the late 1970s.[44] Some successful health art education projects Johnny Briscoe's caterpillar Dreaming spirit painting *Anumarra - Working for Health, 1979* which became a symbol for the Aboriginal health worker program in central Australia. Bronwyn Bancroft also produced a series of prints for the Commonwealth Department of Health, Housing and Community Services on AIDS education.

Indigenous new media artist Jason Davidson has developed his own method of art health education in new media works. [45] He responded to inadequate health education materials by focusing on cultural appropriate ones. He states "Aboriginal people's knowledge and imagination is the key to creating better educational materials, because we are the ones who should be designing and producing culturally appropriate, educational materials for our people. Aboriginal people need to be involved in developing appropriate health educational materials because we know how to communicate to our people both

[43] 'Import ban on Aboriginal products", created by Creative Economy Ltd on 1 October 2006, www.gopetition.com/online/9752.html, viewed 20 October 2006.
[44] Maggie Brady. "Aboriginal art in the social marketing of health', in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, *Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p.450.
[45] Jason Davidson, 'Aboriginal New Media Artist Promoting Health Education,' www.aboriginalimagination.com.au/Aboriginal_Health.html, viewed 20 October 2006.

in text and image. A major component of the communication breakdown in Aboriginal health relates to the inappropriate design of educational materials that non-Indigenous people have been designing and producing." His art deals with themes such as kidney disease.

The Arts Access Breast Screen Visual Arts Project explored health and wellbeing issues with women from diverse cultural backgrounds, using art as a mechanism to raise awareness about health and the prevention of breast cancer.[46] The women's group created a piece of art and as Lyn Briggs, Indigenous health worker notes: "The main message the women wanted to get across with this artwork was to relay the "emotional, spiritual wellbeing" of Indigenous women. This was captured by the use of a mannequin as the centrepiece to the work, dressed in traditional costume. One breast painted in an anatomical style and the other displayed an Aboriginal design which represented breast paintings used in traditional dance. At her feet, a turtle shell was filled with painted emu eggs, showing what health and wellbeing means to each individual woman."

8.2 Healing

Art practice itself has had an impact on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians. Art has been used for healing Indigenous patients suffering from a range of physical and mental ailments. One example is the Art Therapy class in Sydney, The Connections Aboriginal Women's Group, a project supported by the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Services, for Indigenous women who suffer mental illness. Lead by Indigenous artist, Mary Page, the group has been successful in developing an arts practice which has lead to exhibitions and licensing opportunities.[47]

8.3 Art in prisons

In 1998, the ATSIAB supported *Inside Art Out* in partnership with the then ATSIC.[48] Proportionately there still remains large numbers of Indigenous people in prison. In understanding that art grows a strong identity and has rehabilitation powers, the Australia Council through the Aboriginal and Torres

---

[46]Lyn Briggs, a worker with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and a community elder, as cited at http://www.artsaccess.com.au/read/index.cfm?a=detail&id=56, viewed 13 October 2006.

[47] Telephone attendance on Joanne Brown, Indigenous arts worker, 9 October 2006.

[48] Australia Council, *The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts policy of the Australia Council*, Australia Council, Sydney, 2000, p.6.

Strait Islander Arts Board encourages artists in prisons to practice their art. This follows from the recommendations of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* in 1987.

Several Indigenous artists including Albert Namitjira, have been imprisoned for a time. Artists in prisons have depicted a range of experience including the injustice of the justice system, racial discrimination, removal from family, and drug addiction. For artists like Gordon Syron and Walmajarri Artist Jimmy Pike, workshops at prison provided the opportunity for an artistic career. Jimmy Pike work is well known and licensed in clothing – *Desert Designs*. Other artists have included Leslie Griggs and Ronald Bull).[49] The project by Campbelltown City Art Gallery 'Doing time, doing Dreamtime' in 1995 which exhibited works by Reibey Juvenile Justice Centre produced at workshops conducted by Indigenous artists in residence, Mark Leon, Anthony Leslie and Janice Shipley.

8.4 Indigenous women

The visual art has empowered Indigenous women in their communities and have advanced their careers increasing not only their incomes but self-esteem. Many Indigenous women are seen as leaders in their fields. Indigenous visual arts projects include:

- Tjanpi Women's Aboriginal Baskets in Alice Springs is a community developed project that supports Indigenous women living in the remote desert communities - Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjatjara and Yankunytjatjara .[50] Tjanpi is Aboriginal owned and sells authentic and individually handmade Aboriginal baskets, beads, bags and wild harvested bush tucker. As noted by the website, 'Whilst out collecting materials women connect strongly to their traditional country. They hunt and gather food for their families, visit sacred sites and teach children about their country. Basket weaving is providing women with culturally appropriate work and income.'[51]

[49] 'Prison Art', *Oxford companion to Aboriginal art,* op cit, p. 678.
[50]Tjanpi Women's Aboriginal Baskets, www.tjanpiaboriginalbaskets.com, viewed 20 October 2006.
[51] Ibid.

- The Indigenous owned women's business - Arilla Paper (Mt Isa, QLD) manufactures paper from natural plants and grasses.[52] In 2004, Arilla Paper staged a major exhibition at the Craft Queensland Gallery in Brisbane.

- Pwanga Women's Enterprises involves Tiwi women producing handcrafted screen-printed designs on clothing for men, women and children such as t-shirts and sportswear.[53]

- Ali Curung Women's Centre produces paintings (acrylic on canvas). The women artists also make textiles like silk painting and silk screen works on paper.[54]

- Julalikari Arts (Tennant Creek) is an Arts Centre for 16 women. Operating since 1994, the Centre has benefited from training from educational institutions such as Batchelor College and NT University. The Julalikari artists produce paintings (acrylic on canvas), works on paper (linocuts and watercolours, fibre work such as woven baskets and clothing items of t-shirts and bags and ceramics.[55] Peggy Jones, one of the longest members of Julalikari Arts, has developed a strong national and international reputation. Ruth Dawson, another artist, has her work was selected for the Livery on one of the freight trains commissioned to work the new Adelaide - Darwin Railway.

- Walkatjara Art Uluru[56], is an arts centre at Mutitjulu community, and represents female artists including Rene Kulitja her artwork featuring on QANTAS planes.

Indigenous women are excelling in the visual arts sector, there are too many to name in this short paper. Some examples include:

---

[52]Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), *Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Resource Directory 2006,* Canberra, p 31.
[53]Ibid, p 28.
[54]Barkly Regional Arts, www.barklyarts.com.au, viewed at 20 October 2006.
[55]Julalikari Arts, Julalikari Women's Council Arts and crafts Centre, www.julalikariarts.com, viewed 20 October 2006.
[56]Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), *Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Resource Directory 2006,* Canberra, p 29.

- Emily Kame Kngwarreye (*c*1910-1996) was a founding member of the Utopia Women's Batik Group in Northern Territory and was a leading painter in the 1990's.[57]

- Dorothy Napangardi is a Warlpiri woman from the area around Mina Mina in Northern Territory. Napangardi is acclaimed for her paintings of her country and her work featured in a solo exhibition in Sydney at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 2001.[58]

8.5 Artists with disabilities

The medium of visual arts is also a form of expression for people with disabilities. Nyree Reynolds, Gamilaroi artist teaches workshops to people with disabilities.[59] Some Indigenous artists with disabilities have accessed training and programs and have benefits greatly by not only improving their own self-esteem and finding a means to express themselves, they have also become economic self-sufficient.

The Victorian Indigenous artist, Turbo Brown, who has an intellectual disability, started painting only 4 years ago when his carer Uncle Herb Patten enrolled in a diploma of arts in visual arts at the Bundoora RMIT campus and took Turbo along. Already his works are in demand with purchases by Darebin City Council and the National Gallery of Victoria.[60] Turbo is seen as a rising star in Aboriginal art. Judith Ryan, National Gallery of Victoria senior curator of Indigenous art, describes his work as being 'of energy and integrity that is strongly expressive of his cultural identity'.

Access Arts Queensland employs an Indigenous Arts Project officer, Bre Capell. Projects have included assisting the Ku Ku Yalanji artist, Geoff Findlay, who has permanent injury to his spinal chord, find a local artist mentor so that he can

---

[57]National Gallery of Victoria, http://www.nga.gov.au/exhibitions/Kngwarreye/index.html, viewed 19th October 2006.
[58]Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), *Dancing up country: The art of Dorothy Napangardi*, 2003, p 5.
[59] Accessible Arts, *July 2006 Newsletter*, www.aarts.net.au/mod.php?mod=userpage&page_id=163&menu=1328, viewed 20 October 2006.
[60] Caroline Webb, 'Turbo-charged look at the animal world", http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2005/05/21/1116533552808.html#, viewed 13 October 2006.

pursue an interest in visual arts painting by mouth.[61] Geoff has an exhibition planned for 2007.[62]

8.6 Visual Art engages all ages

Visual art is accessible to youth and to the aged. Indigenous youth arts projects focus on connecting children to strong identity and cultural maintenance For example the project *Big ones, little ones*[63] involves Indigenous school children producing artworks from schools around Australia, and exhibiting their art alongside established grown up Indigenous artists.

Another youth arts project coordinated by Carclew Youth Arts Centre in 2004/05 in consultation with the community in the APY Lands, delivered arts and cultural workshops to 12 to 20 years olds in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara land. The aim was to address alcohol and substance misuse (with a focus on education, health and wellbeing).[64]

Visual art is also much practiced by older Indigenous artists. A number of Indigenous artists including the renowned, Emily Kngwarreye only started painting late in life (in Emily's case after 70 years of age).

[61] Access Arts Queensland website, http://www.accessarts.org.au/ripo_artists_profiles_geoff_findlay.htm, viewed 16 October 2006.
[62] This project is funded by both Eacham Shire Council & Cairns City Council Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF).
[63] Gallery Amichi, Big ones, little ones, http://www.amichi.com.au/gallery/, viewed 13 October 2006.
[64] Carclew Youth Arts Centre, 'Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands - Celebrating healthy communities', http://carclew.stg.jaba.com.au/programs/indigenous/anangu.aspx, viewed 16 October 2006.

9. Conclusion

Visual artists express their culture, identity and connection to land/sea and other people through their art. They assert links to family, culture and experience.

Art also provides an outlet for Indigenous political and social commentary. It also provides a means for Indigenous people to record their histories and stories.

Cultural education is another cultural and social benefit – Indigenous people can be educated and also educate others through Indigenous visual arts.

Art unites Indigenous people by providing a cultural setting for networking and practicing culture. Visual arts centre and organisations are therefore important cultural places within Indigenous communities.

The visual arts developing marketing opens opportunities for Indigenous artists to gain commission, collaborate, to take part in cultural exchanges and to exploit their intellectual property in appropriate ways. The sector has also potential to improve the lives of Indigenous people by bringing incomes which can be used to buy health products and services. There are also the benefits of health and well-being. The feel good aspects of arts production cannot be overlooked.

Visual art promotes heath and well-being. It is used in health education and healing, artists in prisons. Furthermore, it improves the lives of Indigenous women and is accessible to all ages.

Visual art is a life source for Indigenous communities. Its benefits extend beyond economic returns. The paintings, the craft, the drawings, etching, photographs and media works connect Indigenous people to each other, the past, the present. Visual art promotes cultural maintenance and cultural development. For centuries, each generation of Indigenous people has handed on cultural traditions as well as stories and information. Within this cultural practice, successive generations of artists have enhanced and added to the cultural wealth of Indigenous people by developing new expressions. This continuum of cultural expression keeps Indigenous cultures strong.

10. Bibliography

Altman, J C, Cultural funding in Australia: Three tiers of Government 1999 – 2000, Cultural Ministers Council Statistics Working Group, Canberra, cited in J C Altman, 'Developing an Indigenous Arts Strategy for the Northern Territory: Issues paper for consultations', Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 2003, Canberra.

Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Tradition today, Indigenous art in Australia*, AGSW, Sydney, 2004.

Australia Council, Support for the Arts Handbook 2006.

Arthur, Bill and Morphy, Frances (eds), *Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia*, The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, Sydney, 2005.

Australia Council, *The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Policy of the Australia Council*, Australia Council, Sydney, 2000.

Australia Council media release, 'Keeping culture strong', http://www.ozco.gov.au/news_and_hot_topics/news/keeping_indigenous_culture_strong/

Brady Maggie, 'Aboriginal art in the social marketing of health', Kleinert and M. Neale (eds), *The Oxford companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press 2000: 450-451.

Caruana, Wally, *Aboriginal art* (new edtn), Thames & Hudson world of art, UK, 2003.

Croft, Brenda L , "Boomalli", Life in Gadigal Country, Gadigal Information Services, 2003.

Eatock, Cathy and Mordaunt, Kim, *Copyrites*.

Gurang Land Council (Aboriginal Corporation) Native Title Business: Contemporary Indigenous art, 'Painting a claim," Keeaira Press, Southport Queensland, 2002.

Janke, Terri, *Our culture: our future: Report on Australian Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights*, Michael Frankel & Company, written and published under commission by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Sydney 1999.

Johnson, Vivien, *Copyrites: Aboriginal Art in the e age of reproductive technologies*, Touring Exhibition 1996 Catalogue, National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association (NIAAA) and Macquarie University, Sydney, 1996.

Kleinert, Sylvia & Neale, Margo, (general editors) and Bancroft, Robyne (cultural editor) *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000.

Morphy, Howard, 'Art and politics: The Bark Petition and the Barunga Statement' pp 100 - 102 in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal art and culture* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000.

Mundine, Djon, 'Jimmy Wululu (1936 - 2005) Bark painter from Arnhemland, Art Monthly Australia, March 2006, pp 27 – 29.

NSW Board of Studies, *Affirmations of Identity – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual artists' resource kit, NSW Artists*, NSW Board of Studies, Sydney, 2000.

Wilson, Carolyn, 'Kaltjiti Arts and Crafts', *Art Monthly*, No 186. December 2005 – February 2006, pp 36 – 38.