

Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection

This is the first exhibition to focus on the extraordinary painted works from Arnhem Land collected by University of Melbourne anthropologist, the late Professor Donald Thomson (1901–1970). The quality, unique nature and inherent importance of the sixty-nine bark paintings together with the hundreds of Yolngu men's ceremonial objects decorated with sacred designs in the Donald Thomson Collection cannot be underestimated.

Donald Thomson was authorised to enter the Aboriginal Arnhem Land Reserve to 'study and report on the language, ceremonies, customs, moral codes, etc., of the various tribes' and arrived at the Roper Bar for the first time in May 1935. By January 1936 he had travelled the area from Roper River to Caledon Bay and around Arnhem Bay, and as far west as Cape Stewart. Returning to Arnhem Land in July 1936, Donald Thomson stayed another seventeen months and visited again in 1942 and 1943. He took over 2500 photographs, wrote more than 1500 pages of field-notes and amassed around 4500 objects.

Thomson's field writings reveal the complexities associated with the artworks' distinctive patterning or *minyrtji*, and the tenets that underpin a uniquely Yolngu artistic practice. Thomson would learn of the intrinsic importance of *minyrtji* as the embodiment of totemic clan ancestors called *wangarr*. The fine aesthetic quality sought and achieved in Yolngu painting—a 'shine' or 'brilliance' called *bir'yun*—was intended to capture the essence of the *wangarr* and harness its strength and power or *marr*.

The works in the exhibition illustrate the diversity of *mardayin minyrtji* or sacred ancestral clan designs. The exhibition layout reflects differences in painting styles between artists of Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties (the Yolngu kinship and religious structure), with artworks by Dhuwa men displayed opposite work by Yirritja men. Works from central and eastern Arnhem Land are shown in separate galleries, revealing regional distinctions.

Lindy Allen
Exhibition curator

Central Arnhem Land

Donald Thomson travelled to Arnhem Land for the second time in July 1936 and by October that year had set up a base camp at Gaartji on the mainland in central Arnhem Land. Over the following year he collected thirty or more paintings that depict *mardayin minytji*, the sacred ancestral clan designs.

The first works made at Gaartji reflect the activity that typically occurs over the wet season when men are painted with *mardayin minytji* for ceremony, most notably the higher order men's ceremonies. At Milingimbi the previous year, Donald Thomson had photographed men on the last day of the important men's Ngarra ceremony when such designs are revealed publicly. For circumcision ceremonies, the chests of young boys being initiated are painted with *mardayin minytji* by the 'same old man' who reveals to them the *rangga* or sacred ceremonial objects.

The first works Donald Thomson collected at Gaartji in early 1937 include the four paintings displayed here, to the right. These relate to the ancestral Dog, Warung, which is important for the Mildjingi clan whose country centres on a sacred waterhole at a place called Garrinyal near the mouth of the Glyde River. The distinctive *minytji* associated with Warung includes the triangular motif that represents monsoonal clouds, *djarrapung*, which herald the arrival of the wet season. The vertical lines are the clouds standing up and the dots represent the rain falling.

Most of the works from central Arnhem Land displayed in this room are painted with the distinctive *likan wangarr minytji* or body designs belonging to ancestors of the major clans of the region. Donald Thomson also collected a very important narrative painting from Tjam Yilkari Kitani, a senior ceremonial leader for the Liyagalawumirr clan. Yilkari painted the story of the Wagilag Sisters and their activities at Miramina, a waterhole sacred to the Liyagalawumirr clan.

Eastern Arnhem Land

A significant series of bark paintings emerged in 1942 when Donald Thomson returned to Arnhem Land as a RAAF squadron leader seconded to the army. He hand-picked a group of fifty Yolngu men from across Arnhem Land to form the nucleus of a fighting force known as the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU) to defend more than 1600 kilometres of Australia's northern coastline against Japanese attack. The NTSRU was overseen by the senior clan leaders with whom Donald Thomson had worked closely in the 1930s, including the important Djapu leader Wonggu Mununggurr. Wonggu had painted the first bark painting (displayed in the adjacent room) for Donald Thomson seven years earlier.

Yolngu from all the major clans across Arnhem Land were based at Garthalala in Caledon Bay. In September 1942, Wonggu with his sons Maama, Mawunpuy and Natjiyalma completed a single major work (displayed on the left) that references the *likan wangarr* or totemic ancestors for the Djapu, a Dhuwa clan. These ancestors are linked to country inland from Caledon Bay and provide the focus of important ceremonial activities. The distinctive motif in this painting is the important Djapu *minytji*—square and rectangular forms inset with lines—that represent *mangan*, the wet season clouds. These are represented stacked on top of one another on the horizon to mark the arrival of the monsoonal rains. In his field-notes Donald Thomson wrote how the *minytji* associated with these clouds was markedly different in form to the diamond motif used by Yirritja clans.

A dozen or more paintings were completed over the next few days in September 1942 by Wonggu's sons and other NTSRU members. These artworks form a unique suite that captures the *mardayin minytji* or sacred ancestral clan designs of the inland and saltwater estates associated with all Yirritja and Dhuwa clans of Blue Mud Bay. The *wangarr* Djan'kawu Sisters, important for Dhuwa clans across Arnhem Land, feature prominently in many of these paintings.



Arafura Sea

Cape Stewart

Elcho Island

● Milingimbi

Yathalamara ●

Gaartji

Woolen River

Miramina ●

Glyde River

Arnhem Bay

Yirrkalā ●

Central Arnhem Land

Arafura Swamp

Blyth River

Goyder River

Eastern Arnhem Land

Wonggu's camp ●

Caledon Bay

Trial Bay

Koolatong River

Matarawatj ●

● Ngilipidji

Walker River

Blue Mud Bay

Woodah Island

Gulf of Carpentaria

Groote Eylandt

Wilton River

Roper Bar ●

Roper River



0 50 100km



FOREWORD

Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection offers remarkable insights into Yolngu art. Donald Thomson's research was innovative for its time and the resulting collection remains dynamic and inspiring. The collection offers a record of Arnhem Land art and culture that is engaged and holistic: it fosters an understanding of the complex networks of place, history, art and experience. Research by Lindy Allen, senior curator, anthropology (Northern Australia), Museum Victoria, has followed Donald Thomson's lead; artists, artworks, symbols and historical experience are all brought to life with vigour, energy and power.

Donald Thomson's detailed exploration of Yolgnu artworks is all the more exciting because it offers such a close experience of their creation. Regardless of cultural origin, artworks often come to us detached from their original context. The passage of time disconnects us from essential data, and from artists and traditions that are the foundation of art's meanings. To learn simple information, such as the date of an artwork, can be an important discovery. The Donald Thomson Collection goes far beyond this. We learn of the day on which an artwork was made. The location, the materials and the tools are documented. The voice of the artist carries, strong and loud, across time. Symbols and meanings are shared in detail. Through a long engagement with the Donald Thomson Collection, field research, community consultation and her own acute analysis, Lindy Allen has established new points of entry to this complex collection.

This exhibition is the product of a long and fruitful collaboration between the University of Melbourne and Museum Victoria. The custody and management of the Donald Thomson Collection is a joint task undertaken by a committee representing both institutions. The staff of Museum Victoria has brought both skill and commitment to the care and conservation of the collection. Museum Victoria is acutely conscious of the importance of the collection and has added to its significance through engaging in extensive research, including talking with people from Aboriginal communities that Donald Thomson visited. The collection continues to evolve, generating new knowledge and contributing to Indigenous cultural strength. This exhibition seeks a new approach to the collection, reflecting on the aesthetic qualities of many key artworks. We are especially grateful to Lindy Allen and her colleagues at both museums for the enthusiasm with which they have engaged in dialogue to create an outstanding exhibition.

Dr Chris McAuliffe
Director
The Ian Potter Museum of Art

Dr Patrick Greene OBE
Chief Executive Officer
Museum Victoria

COVER

Wonggu Mununggurr (with sons, Maama, Mawunpuy and Natjiyalma) cat. no. 22

BACK COVER

Attributed to Mawunpuy Mununggurr cat. no. 25

Ancestral power and the aesthetic is the first exhibition to give focus to the extraordinary painted works collected from Arnhem Land during the mid-1930s and early 1940s by the University of Melbourne anthropologist, the late Professor Donald Thomson (1901–1970). The quality, unique nature and inherent importance of the bark paintings together with the countless objects decorated with sacred ceremonial designs in the Donald Thomson Collection cannot be underestimated. For all its richness, the collection has not attracted the attention it duly deserves, and this exhibition provides the first opportunity to bring together painted works drawing upon the field-work of Donald Thomson¹ and the expertise of Yolngu past and present together with my own curatorial research.²

MINYTJI

The distinctive patterns on the bark paintings and men's objects in the exhibition are sacred ceremonial designs called *minytji*³ and Donald Thomson's field writings reveal the depth of his investigation into the complexities associated with this notion and the tenets that underpin a unique artistic practice. He wrote extensively about the intrinsic importance of *minytji* and noted that it represented the totemic clan ancestors, *likan wangarr*. Further, he wrote that *minytji* was the embodiment of the ancestor—the *wangarr*—in that the patterns mirror the actual design painted on the body of the ancestor in ancestral times. 'The natives [sic] say that when the *wangarr* [was half-ancestor], half *yulngo* [human], he swam or submerged with his body painted and that he [had] this *minytji*.'

A rare depiction of this is seen in the large central figure in cat. no. 25, where one of the Djan'kawu Sister ancestors is shown in half-*wangarr*/half-Yolngu form painted with *minytji*. Little of Donald Thomson's documentation about this work survives, but my own research shows that her footprints in the top right of the painting indicate she is traveling and that the *minytji* surrounding the figure is the reflection onto the ground of the *likan minytji* painted on her body as she walks along in the sun.⁴

Thomson's field-notes detail the way in which *minytji* is painted. He writes about who can paint and under what circumstances; for example, when a person died, the body was painted with their *mardayin minytji*, i.e. the sacred designs of the person's own clan—'he takim *minytji* from that *likan wangarr*'.⁵ Painting the bodies of men with *mardayin minytji* was done for ceremony, most notably the higher order men's ceremonies and circumcision. Thomson learned that the same old man who revealed the *rangga* (sacred object) to young male initiates would paint their chests with their sacred clan designs.

A number of paintings exhibit a strong reference to *minytji* as ceremonial body design. In 1937 Donald Thomson photographed men at Milingimbi on the final day of a Ngarra ceremony when the body paintings are revealed to others. These same designs appear to have been painted for Donald Thomson onto single sheets of bark, one being *Ngarra minytji* (cat. no. 6) representing bandicoot tracks associated with the Gupapuyngu Birrkili clan; and another the Mildjingi clan designs related to the ancestral Dog (cat. no. 9).

Another suite of body painting works were completed for Donald Thomson at Gaartji in central Arnhem Land in 1937 and many typically exhibit the body form and the way in which *minytji* is painted onto a man's chest, up over his shoulders and downwards onto his upper thighs. This suite of ceremonial body design paintings includes the work *Djirr'miny dhaawa* (cat. no. 7).

MARR

Donald Thomson would learn that the fine quality or aesthetic sought and achieved in painting *minytji* was not incidental, and that it was driven by the desire to capture the essence of the *wangarr* and harness its strength and power or *marr*. In field-notes from August 1937, Thomson explores in detail the concept of an aesthetic and the way in which the power of the ancestor is evoked by a sensory experience, a 'flash', when exposed to *minytji*:

The spirit of the whole *minytji*—it is likened to the flash of a sudden 'uplift' when [the men] see the *marr* of the secret *minytji* ... likened also to anger ... the sensation of eyes is—its *wangarr* itself—they mean the sensation of light ... the whole sensation of light expressed to me as 'light colour' ... the penetrating flash, the fixed intent stare of the eye—a wonderful mystical concept—idea—here ... All *minytji*—[Dhuwa] and Yirritja, has this light.⁶

Thomson noted that the word for this 'light' was *bir'yun*, a term that has a gloss in Yolngu language, meaning to sparkle, glitter or shine. In this context, *minytji bir'yun* represents the happiness or playfulness found in 'fresh water and flowers', i.e. the sparkling sensation of flowering white gums reflected in water.

The term *bir'yun* arose again for Thomson in discussions of the Djan'kawu Sisters, represented in a number of works in the exhibition. In this context *bir'yun* was applied to describe the sun and Donald Thomson was told that it was used only for bright light or 'scintillation of the sun and of *likan minytji*'. His informants then pointed to a painted ceremonial basket hanging nearby and described the meaning of the design relating to the tail of the sacred goanna, Djan'ka or Djarrka, which emerged from sacred waterholes formed where the Djan'kawu Sisters plunged their *wapitja* or digging-sticks into the ground.

Thomson also recorded that, by contrast, the meaning and quality of *bir'yun* was 'conceived of as the light or hypnotic stare of angry eyes [which] they demonstrated to me'. His notes describe the light as a flash or 'the "sensation of light" that one gets and carries away in one's mind's eye, from a glance at a *likan minytji*'. This describes *marr* or ancestral power embodied in *minytji* at its most dangerous and by association objects decorated with these ancestral designs similarly hold *wangarr likan marr*. Donald Thomson was told it was like the spirit of the *miringu* (literally 'bad', 'no good') *marr*, and the example given was the anger of the ancestral shark when speared by Murayana, an important *wangarr* for the Gupapuyngu Daygurrurr clan.

DONALD THOMSON'S INSIGHTS

The complexities of the concept of *marr* are well beyond the scope of this exhibition. Donald Thomson himself noted his own limitations in this regard. He writes that the unnamed informant was 'cold and at the end of his patience' and so 'had to write this down in haste'; while at the same time Thomson thought that more time or discussion would not have provided him with greater insight.

Donald Thomson's investigations of Yolngu understandings and the complexities associated with the meanings of designs remained dispersed throughout his field-notes. It was never the focus of in-depth study despite his own conviction as to the principle importance of the bark paintings over all other things he collected. Donald Thomson's field-notes include diagrammatic interpretations of many of the bark paintings in which annotations and descriptions of key elements of the *minytji* reinforce their association with *wangarr*. This was similarly done for key ceremonial objects that, given their sacred and sensitive nature, cannot be discussed here.

Donald Thomson's own insights include the way in which perspective is used by Yolngu. As his knowledge builds over time he explores the way in which specific clans represent and use *minyitji* distinctively or in relation to each other; for example, the Mildjingi clan designs on the sacred men's basket (cat. no. 12) represent the clouds that bring the seasonal monsoonal rains. This *minyitji* appears on a number of Mildjingi clan paintings here (see, for example, cat. no. 11). This is in stark contrast with the *minyitji* of the Djapu clan of eastern Arnhem Land, in which these same clouds are characterized by lines within squares as seen in cat. no. 22. However differently the *minyitji* is rendered or whether the *likan minyitji* is done on the body of a man for ceremony or on his ceremonial basket, or elsewhere such as on a bark painting, the essence remains the same, and adherence to appropriate cultural practices is controlled by those with appropriate knowledge and status.

CONCLUSIONS

Yolngu artistic practice is founded upon the principle of capturing the essence of the spirit of the *wangarr likan marr* through a fine and unique aesthetic practice. The quality of the work in this exhibition clearly demonstrates this, giving wonderful examples of the distinctive Yolngu technique of painting *minyitji* that so engaged Donald Thomson. The bark paintings and the ceremonial men's objects emerge from a period during which all that was publicly known of the region was the arrest of Yolngu men for killing Japanese fishermen at Caledon Bay, the investigation of which was the catalyst for Donald Thomson's journey to Arnhem Land in 1935.

These works are drawn from over 4500 objects collected by Donald Thomson between 1935 and 1937 and again in 1942 and 1943. About a third of the bark paintings in the Donald Thomson Collection are shown in this exhibition. The collection also has a large body of highly decorated and painted ceremonial objects from Arnhem Land, many of which have cultural and gender restrictions associated with them. The Arnhem Land holdings overall have been the subject of discussions with the relevant Yolngu variously over the past twenty years, with visitors coming to the museum to see the objects as well as field-based research that has seen objects taken to Arnhem Land. Most of the bark paintings in this exhibition have never been exhibited or published.

The works displayed here have been chosen based on their thematic or cultural content together with clan and moiety affiliations in order to provide a representative sample of the broad range of works in the Donald Thomson Collection. Many works represent the earliest known depictions of the travels of the major *wangarr* or creation ancestors and, while there is little information about how Donald Thomson came to have these painted, they provide clear statements about Yolngu ownership and responsibilities for clan estates.⁷

ENDNOTES

1. In the mid-1930s when Donald Thomson did his research and collecting in Arnhem Land, the work of Aboriginal artists was considered 'primitive art' in both academe and the public arena. A framework for considering the work of Aboriginal artists as art, albeit 'primitive', emerged with the work of WB Spencer, who collected the first bark paintings from western Arnhem Land in 1912. These were exhibited at the (then) National Museum of Victoria in 1915.
2. I took images and documentation relating to the bark paintings in the Donald Thomson Collection to Arnhem Land in 1994 and have worked over subsequent years to discuss details and gain further insight into the works. Significant research was undertaken as Partner Investigator on the ARC Linkage Project (LP 0347221), *Anthropological and Aboriginal Perspectives on the Donald Thomson Collection: Material Culture, Collecting and Identity*, a collaboration between Museum Victoria and the Australian National University (2002–06).
3. *Minytji* is also spelt *miny'tji* and *mintji* (the latter was used by Donald Thomson).
4. Minyipa Mununggurr, interview with the author at Buku-Larrnggay Arts Centre, Yirrkala, 2002.
5. *Minytji* of a person's *mari's* (maternal grandmother's) clan could be painted onto the body. However that of other clans was only done, for example, when a person died away from their own country and 'people do not know or have no right to use his own [the deceased's] *mintji*'. Donald Thomson's field-notes, on loan to Museum Victoria from the Thomson family (Donald Thomson Manuscript, p. 117).
6. Donald Thomson Manuscript, p. 81.
7. Particularly important in relation to this are the works *Dhukurra dhaawa* (cat. no. 5) and *Djapu minytji* (cat. no. 22); and the suite of works (cat. nos 22–26) produced by members of the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit at the base camp at Garrthlala in September 1942.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Lindy Allen
Exhibition curator



Attributed to Makani Wilingarr cat. no. 11



Attributed to Makani Wilingarr cat. no. 9

Documentation on the Donald Thomson Collection is incomplete in parts. Where necessary, artists' details or artwork titles have been attributed from information gained in field research in Arnhem Land or research conducted in Melbourne; however consensus may not always have been reached. The artists were among the first generation of Yolngu to use a family name (a practice introduced by missionaries and government agencies for ease of administration), which is included here where known.

Dimensions are given as height before width before depth.

Where Yolngu language is used in artwork titles, maximal capitalization has been used to signify character and place names.

All works are held in the Donald Thomson Collection, the University of Melbourne and Museum Victoria.

CENTRAL ARNHEM LAND, NORTHERN TERRITORY

- 1
Artist unknown
Marrangu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Marrangu minytji (Marrangu clan design) on *bathi mindirr* (basket)
date unknown
natural pigments on twined pandanus basket
34.1 x 11 x 6.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
February 1942
DT1402
- 2
Tjam Yilkari Kitani
born c. 1890, died 1956
Liyagalawumirr clan, Dhuwa moiety
Wagilag dhaawu
(Wagilag Sisters story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
126.4 x 68.1 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
20 June 1937
DT58
- 3
Artist unknown
Djambarrpuynu clan,
Dhuwa moiety
Burruwai' dhaawu
(Native Cat story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
35 x 79 x 47 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
28 February 1937
DT574
- 4
Artist unknown
Attributed to Djambarrpuynu clan,
Dhuwa moiety
Marrnggitj (Doctor/Clever Man)
and *Kalka* (Sorcerer) c. 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
66 x 74.3 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson c. 1937
DT37

- 5
Artist unknown
Walamangu clan, Yirritja moiety
Dhukurra dhaawu
(Sacred clan story) c. 1935
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
128.3 x 63.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson c. 1935
DT84

- 6
Artist unknown
Gupapuyngu Birrkili clan,
Yirritja moiety
Ngarra minytji
(Ngarra ceremony designs) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
152.3 x 64.7 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
February 1937
DT75

- 7
Artist unknown
Ganalbingu clan, Yirritja moiety
Djirr'miny dhaawa
(Sacred Firefly story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
105.7 x 63.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
June 1937
DT76

- 8
Artist unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Warung dhaawu
(Sacred Dog story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
132.5 x 100.5 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
January 1937
DT78

- 9
Attributed to Makani Wilingarr
born 1905, died 1985
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Karnda Karnda dhaawu
(Sacred Dog story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
135.2 x 65.5 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
February 1937
DT45

- 10
Attributed to Makani Wilingarr
born 1905, died 1985
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Warung dhaawu
(Sacred Dog story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
125.6 x 61.7 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
February 1937
DT72

- 11
Attributed to Makani Wilingarr
born 1905, died 1985
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk
(Monsoonal Cloud design) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
127 x 64.2 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
20 February 1937
DT83

- 12
Artist unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk
(Monsoonal Cloud design)
on *bathi mindirr* (basket)
date unknown
natural pigments on twined pandanus basket
26 x 11 x 7.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
4 October 1936
DT1383

- 13
Artist unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk (Monsoonal Cloud design) on *bilma* (clapstick)
date unknown
natural pigments on wood
34.1 x 2.2 x 2.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
August 1942
DT3041

- 14
Artists unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk
(Monsoonal Cloud design)
on *pamatuka* (smoking pipes)
date unknown
natural pigments on wood and metal
5.1 x 87.1 x 2.6 cm,
5 x 84.3 x 2.3 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
29 August 1942
DT2974, DT2977

- 15
Artist unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk (Monsoonal Cloud design) on *gamununggu* (white pigment)
date unknown
natural pigment
4.8 x 18.8 x 9.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
29 August 1942
DT2933

EASTERN ARNHEM LAND,
NORTHERN TERRITORY

16
Wonggu Mununggurr
born c. 1884, died 1958
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Sacred and 'just drawing' *minyiti*
(designs) 1935
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
60.6 x 143.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
16 July 1935
DT57

17
Wonggu Mununggurr
born c. 1884, died 1958
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Marawat (brush/'hair of the head') 1935
human hair bound on wood with fibre
7.7 x 0.4 x 0.4 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
16 July 1935
DT3048

18
Wuluwirr Mununggurr
born c. 1920, died c. 1940
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Bulmurr (brush/stick) 1935
wood with frayed end
17.9 x 0.4 x 0.4 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
17 July 1935
DT3044

19
Artist unknown
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Djerrk (string bag) with *djalkurrk*
(orchid stem), and pigments
date unknown
vegetable fibre
51 x 26 x 0.4 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
13 July 1935
DT1531

20
Wuluwirr Mununggurr
born c. 1920, died c. 1940
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Painted message stick 1935
natural pigments on wood
3.1 x 18.9 x 0.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
14 July 1935
DT3050

21
Artists unknown
Wangurri clan, Yirritja moiety
Marawat (brush/'hair of the head') 1935
human hair bound on wood with fibre
7.6 x 0.3 x 0.3 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
18 August 1935
DT3049, DT7425

22
Wonggu Mununggurr (with sons,
Maama, Mawunpuy and Natjiyalma)
born c. 1884, died 1958
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Djapu minytji (Djapu clan design) 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
189.4 x 105.2 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
15 September 1942
DT66

23
Maama Mununggurr
born c. 1900, died 1970
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Djan'kawu Sisters story:
Djarrka (Sacred Goanna) 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
186.2 x 109.5 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
17 September 1942
DT67

24
Attributed to Muwarra Ganambarr
born c. 1917, died 2005
Datiwuy clan, Dhuwa moiety
Djan'kawu Sisters story: *Djarrka*
(Sacred Goanna) and ***Daarpa***
(Sacred Tree) 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
130.6 x 73.1 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
September 1942
DT51

25
Attributed to Mawunpuy Mununggurr
born c. 1900, died c. 1960
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Djan'kawu Sisters story 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
165.8 x 119.5 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
September 1942
DT65

26
Djimbarayun Ngurruwuthun
born c. 1900, died c. 1960
Munyuku clan, Yirritja moiety
Dhulwung (Sacred Fern) story 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
167 x 88.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
17 September 1942
DT61

27
Djimbarayun Ngurruwuthun
born c. 1900, died c. 1960
Munyuku clan, Yirritja moiety
Dhulwung (Sacred Fern) story design
on paddle 1942
wood
150 x 12.2 x 2.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
18 August 1942
DT896

28
Artist unknown
Warramiri clan, Yirritja moiety
Warramiri minytji
(Warramiri clan design) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
96.2 x 67.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
June 1937
DT69

29
Attributed to Makarrwala Munyarryun
born c. 1900, died c. 1960
Wangurri clan, Yirritja moiety
Dhanarr'nalpi (Mangrove Worm)
story 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
135.5 x 67.2 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
March 1937
DT70

30
Artist unknown
Wangurri clan, Yirritja moiety
Wangurri mardayin minytji
(Wangurri sacred clan design) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
142 x 52.4 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
August 1937
DT85

31
Mundukul Marawili
born c. 1890, died c. 1950
Madarrpa clan, Yirritja moiety
Mundukul (Ancestral Snake) and
Yirwarra (Fish Trap) story 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
175.3 x 103.3 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
19 September 1942
DT64

PIGMENTS

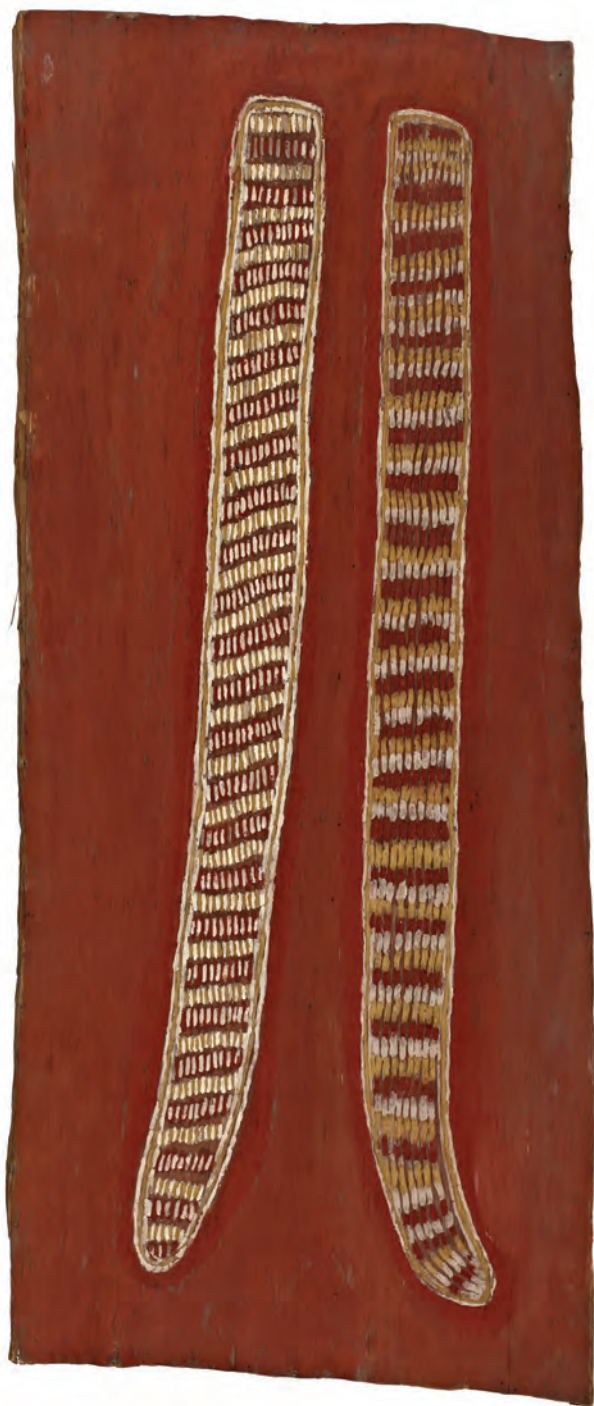
32
Gangul and buthalak
(yellow ochres)
3.8 x 20.4 x 16 cm,
3.5 x 19.4 x 10.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
July 1935
DT2935, DT5837

33
Ratipa (red ochre) wrapped in bark
2.5 x 7.2 x 3.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
11 September 1935
DT2938

34
Miku (red ochre)
4.7 x 9.8 x 6.6 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
11 September 1935
DT2936

35
Grindstone for ochres
11.3 x 20 x 14.4 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson c. 1935
DT7266

36
Grindstone for gapang
(white pigment)
4.3 x 24.8 x 19 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
6 June 1935
DT1263



Artist unknown cat. no. 6



Artist unknown cat. no. 5



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ANCESTRAL POWER AND THE AESTHETIC: ARNHEM LAND PAINTINGS AND OBJECTS FROM THE DONALD THOMSON COLLECTION

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The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne

Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection

Presented by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, and Museum Victoria

Opening speech by Dr Ray Marginson AM, 3 June 2009

I never knew Donald well. By the time I arrived as vice-principal in 1966 he was accepted as a difficult man to deal with. As time went on I began to understand, with great sympathy, the reasons behind his state of mind.

Among the many blows he had suffered which coloured his view of the world was the destruction by fire in 1946 of 22,000 feet of cinematic film taken in Arnhem Land, with negatives of still photographs, and much else. All loaned to the Commonwealth at its request. Film shown and acclaimed in London by the Royal Geographic Society was the subject of a personal letter from Julian Huxley to the prime minister Robert Menzies urging the making of it into an official film. The loss was caused by criminal neglect; the films were left outside the safe storage vault.

Potentially one of the great documentaries of the world, this work would have cemented Donald's international status as an anthropologist. This enormous blow had followed decades of struggle for the funding of his work. One principle cause of this was due to the professional view that put his work at odds with the mainstream of anthropology and his consequential estrangement from significant figures in the field; in fact simply enmity from figures like Professor Elkin.

A further episode which affected him greatly was his exclusion from Cape York by the Queensland Government through pressure by church authorities after his vigorous campaign in the late '20s to try and halt the brutal treatment of Aboriginal people on the missions, particularly the beating of young women, their chaining to trees and much else. Much later he was greatly frustrated by the failure of his efforts at improving conditions at the Lake Tyers Victorian Aboriginal Reserve. He resigned from its board in 1967.

The breadth of training that Donald undertook and the depth of his understanding in natural history, of biology, flora, fauna; his willingness to acquire proficiency in the languages of people he lived amongst; his great skill in photography—all enabled him to understand and study how people lived, talked to each other, how they handled economic activity, their material culture and the part significant ceremonies, ritual and mythology played in their everyday life.

I still remain amazed at the complexity of his collections, his meticulous labelling and record-keeping, his curiosity and interest. Thomson collected 7000 artefacts, 200 herpetological, mammalian, ornithological and botanical specimens. The literary estate is 7000 pages of field notes and diaries, detailed language notes and, almost the crowning glory for their quality and composition, the collection of photographs, negatives, and glass plates—some 11,000 items plus 25,000 feet of film and spoken tapes, hundreds of maps and many drawings.

It is also a matter for bewilderment how he accomplished what he did, in the face not only of collegial hostility but physically, on the ground, embedded for years in the Arnhem Land community. The heat, the physical and technical problems that beset him in such practical areas as simply developing his photographs—problems of suitable water, of emu chicks pulling negatives off drying string, of lugging full and half-plate cameras into places like the Arafura Swamp, or later in the '50s being bogged in the Great Sandy Desert.

I should say something about the actual acquisition of the works before us. Donald was deeply versed in the traditions and practices of exchange and purchase of the people he lived amongst. His diaries note in detail everything obtained by gift or purchase and the close negotiation involved. He knew what he should pay and did so. In one instance he was

bargained up to more tomahawks and ropes of hair string than he really wanted to pay. He also knew the items he should not, and probably would not, be allowed to collect.

I think Donald Thomson would be happier today. Not only with today's fine display and its insight into a particular part of his work, but also with the achievements of the efforts of the past three decades.

The substantial field-work, including the taking of his images to the descendants of many he knew, of the sponsored visits of senior Arnhem Land men and women to see and assist in the interpretation of items.

Pleased with the highly successful ARC linkage grant work between Lindy Allen and Louise Hambly of the ANU; of the major manuscript, due soon, on the Lama Lama people of Princess Charlotte Bay, Cape York.

Of the electronic reformatting of the field notes Judith Wiseman typed up; of the digitising and colour recovery of the beautiful photographs of the 1950s expeditions into the Great Sandy Desert. (The Bindibu, 1975 Nelson.)

Above all of the many publications that have emerged from his years of effort, including the enlarged new edition of *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land* (Melbourne University Press, 2003) compiled by Nicolas Peterson. The latter's work with Bruce Rigsby, *Donald Thomson, the man and scholar* (Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, 2005), the work of Howard Morphy, the numerous journal contributions and conferences involving the collection.

Over the 36 years since the Donald Thomson Collection reached Museum Victoria, it has been nurtured by many. Initially a significant volunteer was his last secretary, whom I have mentioned, Judith Wiseman. Working with the curators and Mrs Thomson she helped to put it in preliminary order. The text of the volume *Thomson time* (Museum of Victoria, 1996) edited by Lindy Allen, is hers. The university gave her an honorary master of philosophy to acknowledge her devoted work. An unusual and well deserved honour.

Chris McAuliffe has tonight paid tribute to the long and sustained support of Mrs Dorita Thomson, whose actions made it possible for the collection to be safely housed and conserved in Museum Victoria; to be accessible to the people whose history and life it records, to scholars and as a source of information and understanding for the wider public.

It was with great regret that we accepted Dorita's resignation from the Donald Thomson Administration Committee and all of us are pleased the university has nominated her daughter Louise in her place, as one of its committee representatives. The committee, which is not merely advisory, has had the benefit of many distinguished contributors, including scholars such as the late Professor Greg Denning, Professor Roger Benjamin, Dr Antonio Sagona and currently Professor John Poynter and Dr Alison Inglis. These with senior museum officers such as Dr Robin Hirst, the Indigenous Cultures Department under Dr Mike Green with his curators and collection managers, all have been central to the task. Lindy Allen and the collection manager Rosemary Wrench have had decades of close working with the Thomson family. I would like to acknowledge the sustained contribution of the staff, of the committee itself and of the university jointly with Museum Victoria, in bringing this, one of the world's great ethnographic collections into its present state—ordered, conserved and accessible. Chairing the committee has been a satisfying 36 years.

On tonight's exhibition: this is a great moment for all involved. The selection has been perceptive and the jointly financed conservation meticulous. The catalogue with its insightful foreword and essay by Lindy Allen deserves close reading.

The theme is a nice marriage of the interests of the Ian Potter Museum of Art and of Museum Victoria. Many of the works are having their first public viewing and it is hoped they will, in Lindy's words, attract to the collection the attention it truly deserves. It is sobering to realise they are drawn from over 4,000 objects and only one third of the 70 bark paintings are being shown.

It also highlights among many other aspects the integral part the ritual and artistic production of the images played in the culture, practice and beliefs of the Yolngu. We are privileged to view them.

Thank you for your patience in enabling me to say something about Donald who, almost incidentally with the major thrust of his life's work, has enabled you to enjoy this great exhibition.

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