

THE HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA

a new genre unfolds

Michael Munkara
Tiwi Language Group
Aged twelve years
My Country, 1975-6
560 x 380mm
Felt pen, paint on paper
Francis Xavier's Boys' School, Nguiu Bathurst Island NT
National Museum of Australia

The Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council was and remains a unique body of Aboriginal elders representing Indigenous communities throughout Australia. The Board was established to stimulate and promote Aboriginal artists, and expand commercial opportunities to publicise and market their artwork, with particular emphasis on the preservation of their cultural identity. It felt that it was particularly important to include Aboriginal children in this developing transition from assimilation to self-determination. However, the means of initiating this journey effectively from a child's perspective was challenging as there was, at that time, little comparative coverage in this specialist field.

All members of this Board were Indigenous Australians, with the exception of the first Director Robert Edwards, and his successor Alan West. The Board actively supported art organisations that were established in Aboriginal communities, with funding from the Board to include resident art advisers to assist with sales and marketing.

The establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board is a significant step towards restoring to Aboriginal people the right to make decisions over matters directly concerning their own culture and way of life. It is they who are the experts in questions relating to Aboriginal art and the Government now looks to their expertise for guidance¹.

This new development allowed the artists and their community a degree of economic independence, and established their vital role in contemporary Australian art. In particular, the Board was active in purchasing art and artefacts for its own collection, which became, in a very short time, the insignia of Aboriginal Australia throughout the world. Aboriginal art was displayed in Australian embassies abroad, and exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal art and artefacts were specifically collated to exhibit and tour internationally for extended periods of time.

The collection was transferred to the National Museum of Australia by Deed of Gift in 1991. The collection had become



Mary Agnes Timaepatua
Tiwi Language Group
Age unknown
Tiwi men chasing Joe Cooper's horses, 1975-6
560 x 380mm
Paint on paper
St. Therese's Girls' School, Nguiu Bathurst Island NT
National Museum of Australia

complex in terms of administration, as it required facilities for its long-term safekeeping. It formed a core for a national collection of contemporary Aboriginal material: it was acknowledged that this collection offered exceptional research potential with the identification of new trends in Aboriginal art and material culture. The majority of the contemporary objects produced between 1973 and 1989 reflected subsistence tools for hunting, fishing and warfare, with a large disclosure of ceremonial objects, principally bark paintings.

Included with the transferred objects were packages of 3800 children's drawings that had been stored for many years at Artbank, a Commonwealth Government Art Agency. These artworks were originally collected for *The Aboriginal Children's History of Australia: Written and Illustrated by Australia's Aboriginal Children*, published by Rigby, Adelaide in 1977. The collection of material for the book is an extraordinary story. So too are the works of art created by thousands of Aboriginal child artists from diverse geographic locations throughout Australia during 1975-77.

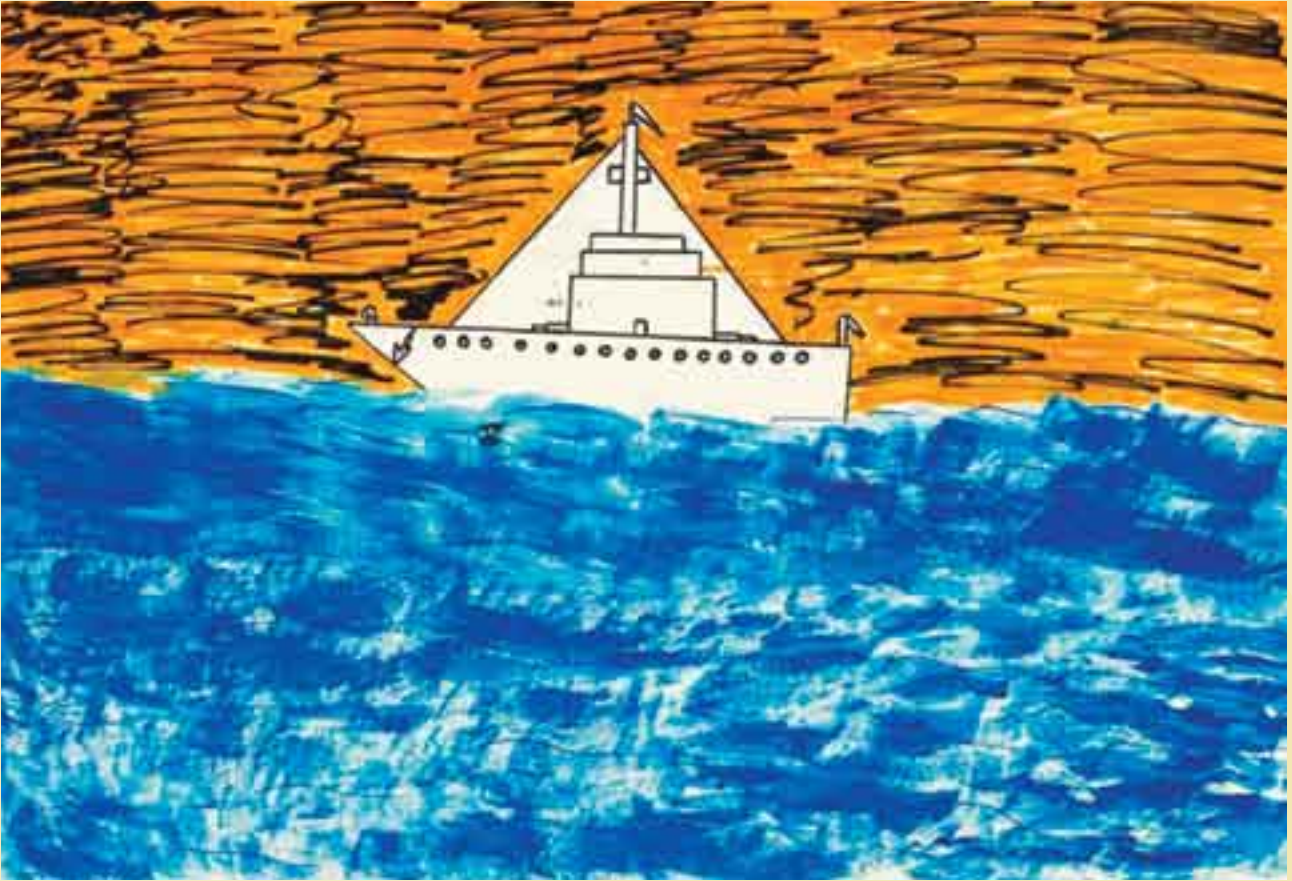
Robert Edwards has explained that the idea of the children's collection evolved in 1975 aboard a flight to Canberra. He was seated next to the American publisher Edward J. McGrath Jr, Director of the Hawaiian publishing firm, Island Heritage Limited.² McGrath asked his fellow passenger the inevitable question under these circumstances: 'What do you do?' On hearing Edward's involvement nationally with Australian Aboriginal communities,³ McGrath explained that he was publishing a series of



Jules Kerinauiua
Tiwi Language Group
Aged fourteen years
Pukumani, 1975-6
560 x 378mm
Felt pen on paper
Francis Xavier's Boys' School, Nguiu Bathurst Island NT
National Museum of Australia

children's histories from different nations throughout the world. He produced from his briefcase a copy of *A Child's History of Hawaii*⁴ and an exchange of ideas for a history book by Aboriginal children ensued.

At that time Robert Edwards was Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board. He recalls that the flight was fortuitous, as he had for some time been thinking about ways and means of linking Indigenous children into the Aboriginal Arts Board's art programs. Children's art seemed the most probable and the most practical way of involving children, especially if the project could be organised through the school system. It would also be the most reliable way of reaching the children in all Aboriginal communities.



Top: Finton Timaepatua
Tiwi Language Group
Age unknown
Ship on sea, 1975-6
560 x 380mm
Paint, felt pen on paper
Francis Xavier's Boys' School, Nguuu Bathurst Island NT
National Museum of Australia

Bottom: Marita Kantilla
Tiwi Language Group
Aged eleven years
Cooling off, 1975-6
562 x 378mm
Felt pen on paper
St. Therese's Girls' School, Nguuu Bathurst Island NT
National Museum of Australia





Marie Lynette Puruntatameri
 Tiwi Language Group
 Aged nine years
Legend of the Cockatoo Woman, 1975-6
 560 x 380mm
 Paint, felt pen on paper
 St. Therese's Girl's School, Nguiu Bathurst Island NT
 National Museum of Australia

A project to produce children's art works for a history book authored by Aboriginal children was subsequently proposed to the Aboriginal Arts Board, who approved and implemented the project in 1976. It was indeed a task to pull the book together within a wider social and historical context. Michael Gray was recommended for appointment to the position of consultant for the book collection project, and his contribution to the success of the publication cannot be over estimated.⁵ He was responsible for researching and coordinating the project, which incorporated 70 participating Aboriginal schools from all states except Victoria and the Torres Strait. *The Aboriginal Children's History of Australia* project was one of many to encourage bilingual education in Aboriginal communities.

The Aboriginal Arts Board also commissioned a film *Dreamtime, This Time, Dream Time* under the direction of Wendy Hucker, the Director of Air Programs International. The same drawings as those produced for the book were filmed, with additional material gathered for the special needs for animation. Children again painted and drew the stories of their heritage, and hundreds more drawings were added to the Aboriginal Arts Board collection.

Throughout the abundant correspondence generated for the collection of art works project, it was acknowledged that the child's interpretation of their Australia heritage would be a combination of both fact and imagination. In the initial draft concept paper there was affirmation for the book to be truly representative of Aboriginality. It should recognise contributions from three significant areas of

Aboriginal culture: urban, rural to include pastoral or fringe communities, and the traditional societies.

This introduction to this singular collection represents an era of visual history with an emphasis on the pictorial language of children, and offers an alternative to the accepted cross-cultural historical debate. To illustrate the point, Tiwi children from Bathurst and Melville Islands visualised the key components of *The Aboriginal Children's History of Australia*. They drew together strands of Tiwi culture to give shape to their cultural heritage, interpreting the six chapters of the book: Dreaming, Old Time, The Macassans, The Whitefellas, Today and My Country.

Nancy Michaelis ATSSIP Program

- 1 Aboriginal Arts Board Papers Appendix 2, Aboriginal Involvement in School Curricula. Introduction, Agenda Papers for 9th meeting, Shepparton 5-6 October 1974.
- 2 As a member of the Federal Teachers Corps program, Edward McGrath was a Teacher Corps intern in Hawaii where he developed a person-to-person cultural exchange program between Hawaiian and Navajo Indian children. McGrath left teaching to further his Great Ideas Inc. company development.
- 3 Edwards had a very successful career background in cultural areas, especially Indigenous art and material culture. He was a former curator of Anthropology at the South Australian Museum; deputy principal of the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies; inaugural executive director of the International Cultural Corporation, now Art Exhibitions Australia, and first Director of the newly amalgamated Museum of Victoria.
- 4 'The Aboriginal Children's History of Australia' (1977) became one of the series in the 'Child's Point of View Library'. This anthology to include 'A Child's History of Hawaii' (1973), 'A Child's History of America' (1975), 'An Exceptional View of Life by Handicapped Children' (1977), and 'Mexico as Seen by Her Children' (1978), was a project created by Edward J McGrath in association with Island Heritage Limited.
- 5 Mike Gray had extensive experience teaching in urban and Aboriginal communities and was at the time a lecturer at the College of Aboriginal Education, attached to the Torrens College of Advanced Education.