

CHARLES MOUNTFORD AND THE 'BASTARD BARKS'

A Gift from the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1948

Mountford Expedition Works

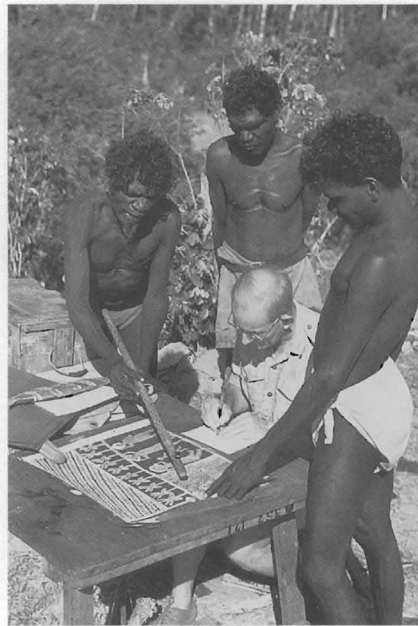
Margo Neale

All works discussed in this essay are from the Queensland Art Gallery Collection.

Charles Percy Mountford (1890–1976) was an amateur ethnographer and collector who helped promote Aboriginal art during the 1940s and 1950s, at a time when it was seen to reside more correctly within the precinct of orthodox anthropology. Mountford collected bark paintings as art, rather than artefact, using methods dismissed as illegitimate by the anthropological establishment, thus the title 'bastard barks'.

From the air there was a tree so full of white birds in its branches, so crested with birds, it looked like a tree in white flower. As the plane came over it the tree-top broke into a wheeling white cloud ... under the right wing a big boomerang of blue water was shining in its verdant rim of rice-grass. Beside the billabong lagoon were a dozen tents, their canvas a sun-faded green. The Arnhem Land Expedition.¹

Camped in these tents at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), five hundred kilometres east of Darwin, in November 1948, were the sixteen members of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL), grandiosely described as 'the largest [scientific] expedition in Australian history',² and the first major collaborative project between Australia and the United States. Led by Charles Percy Mountford, it was an extraordinary event that attracted national attention, with politicians, public figures, scientists and the media lauding the expedition members as they toured capital cities attending viceregal, civic and academic



receptions.³ Funded by the Australian Commonwealth Government, the National Geographic Society and the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, the participants carried a staggering forty-five tons of gear, including over a ton of laboratory glassware, and collected a further twenty-five tons of specimens over the eight months of the tour, amongst which were about five hundred paintings on bark and card, along with several thousand Aboriginal implements and weapons.

In an unprecedented gesture, one hundred and forty-four of these paintings were pledged to the six state art galleries, in preference to museums.⁴ The Queensland National Art Gallery was the site for this landmark distribution, when the state gallery directors converged on Brisbane for an August 1956 meeting. The paintings, freighted from Melbourne, were assembled for the directors to select twenty-four works apiece, which they were keen to do, as one director commented, before

'the anthropological people' pick(ed) first 'and we get the leavings'.⁵

This gift now forms the historic core of the Queensland Art Gallery's Indigenous Australian Art Collection. This was one of the first instances of Aboriginal art being accepted into art galleries for aesthetic rather than ethnographic qualities — a reversal of prewar collecting practices in which works from such expeditions would go to museums without question. This convention was compounded by a lack of interest from public art galleries in Aboriginal art. Even three years later, when Tony Tuckson installed the newly commissioned Pukumani poles from Melville Island at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the commentary was ambivalent:

the graveposts ... made a somewhat bizarre display ... and most people, admitting that the poles are delightful in themselves, will wonder if the proper place for them is not the museum ... Though they have definite artistic merit of an elementary kind, they are really in the nature of ethnological curiosities [rather] than works of art.⁶

The Queensland National Art Gallery was a partial exception, having begun active purchasing, albeit low key, before the 1956 gift. However, despite the apparent early interest in the Mountford Collection at this Gallery, these works were not officially accessioned until 1991, a process repeated in the other receiving galleries. Reluctant to 'look a gift horse in the mouth', especially from such a high-profile national spectacle, and flattered to be treated to the booty before the anthropologists, the state gallery directors accepted a gift they were not

Facing page
Groote Eylandt
Community
Australia
The Southern Cross and the coal sack (the Wanamoumitja brothers spearing Alakitja) 1948
Natural pigments on bark
68.5x47.5cm (irreg.)
Gift of the 1948
American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land 1956
Queensland Art Gallery

Above
Charles Mountford recording iconographic details of a bark painting, Arnhem Land, 1948.
Howell Walker
© National Geographic Image Collection



really sure what to do with. To consider barks as equal partners in a 'fine art' collection at that time, despite the logic and good intentions, was premature for these players. In 1960 the Director of the Queensland National Art Gallery, Robert Haines, did not consider most of the Mountford barks worthy of inclusion in the ground-breaking exhibition 'Australian Aboriginal Art' (which was organised by and toured state galleries), despite a specific request from the curators.⁷

Nevertheless, this donation set in place some of the conditions that would allow change. Painting on bark for an outside audience was a relatively new phenomenon and these were among the first images on bark to be widely considered. Despite the growing appreciation of Aboriginal works during the 1940s and 1950s, stimulated by an increasing number of exhibitions and research projects, 'the Aboriginal art collections remained largely root-bound within the ethnographic sections of natural history museums, and the dichotomy between the ethnographic and the aesthetic was perpetuated.'⁸ Those exhibitions that were shown outside museums primarily focused on decorative and formal elements. For instance, 'Australian Aboriginal Art and Its Application', at the David Jones Art Gallery, Sydney, in 1941, was specifically assembled to inspire white Australian artists and designers in the use of borrowed Indigenous motifs.

Of course, the shift from the ethnographic was partly driven by a belated response to the international art world's interest in the 'primitive', enthusiastically embraced by artists such as Margaret Preston, Tony Tuckson, James Gleeson and others.⁹

The national distribution of the Mountford Collection not only provided the critical first step for many art galleries in the building of Indigenous collections, but also established a benchmark which makes it possible to assess future developments of Aboriginal art in terms of production, collection, exhibition and reception. Of particular interest is the large number of works from the expedition that were done on cardboard instead of bark, a pragmatic decision based on the scarcity of bark during



the dry season and the inconvenience of transporting such large numbers of works.

For similar reasons of portability and availability, art advisers at Gunbalanya in the late 1980s gave bark painters card and paper to produce their images. This more recent practice was met with opposition by those who viewed it not only as a corruption of authenticity but also as a threat to the bark painting industry. Mountford and his supporters in the 1940s obviously did not see any erosion of legitimacy in the use of card. The images, rather than the medium, denoted authenticity, a distinction that continues to escape some enthusiasts today. Admittedly, a more subtle problem is created by the use of a 'flat', and potentially less lively, surface. However, it is interesting to note that matching fears were expressed about the introduction of boards and acrylic paint to desert artists in the early 1970s.

Works commissioned by the expedition were not only small but irregularly shaped, showing little concern for the refinement, 'polish' and scale that would be demanded by emerging commercial markets from the late 1970s. Most of the AASEAL works featured simple, often single, motifs of apparently everyday subjects like birds, fish, hunting scenes or camp life. Few of them described the ancestral and cosmological themes sought in subsequent decades. However, Mountford has been credited with being the 'first to record the geometric-style bark paintings associated with features of the Ancestral landscape' around Oenpelli of which there are three examples in the Queensland Art Gallery Collection: *Ceremonial design*, *Mardayin or ceremonial designs used for body painting and on carved wooden objects* and *Swamp*.¹⁰ Mostly figurative in style, they have a rawness and charm very different from the more complex, ordered and rectilinear bark paintings collected in the late 1950s from Yirkkala in north-east Arnhem Land by Tony Tuckson and art patron Dr Stuart Scougall.

Three Expedition Camps

The three campsites across Arnhem Land were selected according to their varying

Left
Milingimbi Community
Australia
Ceremonial design 1948
Natural pigments on
paper mounted on card
58.5x45.7cm
Gift of the 1948
American–Australian
Scientific Expedition
to Arnhem Land 1956
Queensland Art Gallery

Right
Gulbidja Bara
Australia
active 1940–50
*Bara, the north-west
wind* 1948
Natural pigments
on bark
58x38cm (irreg.)
Gift of the 1948
American–Australian
Scientific Expedition
to Arnhem Land 1956
Queensland Art Gallery

Artist unknown
Australia
*Mamariga, the south-
east wind* 1948
Natural pigments
on bark
76.5x39.5cm (irreg.)
Gift of the 1948
American–Australian
Scientific Expedition
to Arnhem Land 1956
Queensland Art Gallery

topographical conditions — an island, a coastal community and an inland area. These differences 'determined not only the distribution of different flora and fauna but also the Aboriginal way of life', a connection that Mountford clearly understood as integral to the style and cultural significance of the art produced in each region.¹¹ The following descriptions of the works collected trace the route of the expedition.

Camp 1 — Groote Eylandt

Groote Eylandt is located in the Gulf of Carpentaria some fifty kilometres from the coast of north-east Arnhem Land and six hundred and thirty kilometres east of Darwin. Three hundred square kilometres in size, it is the largest of an archipelago that includes Chasm and Bickerton islands. Groote is called Ayangkwulyumuda, meaning 'big island', by those on the smaller islands nearby, a term that is also used to describe the mainland.

Fourteen weeks were spent on the island, beginning in April 1948, at a site described by Mountford as 'an Island camp with a somewhat stony hinterland and a distinctive Aboriginal culture'.¹²

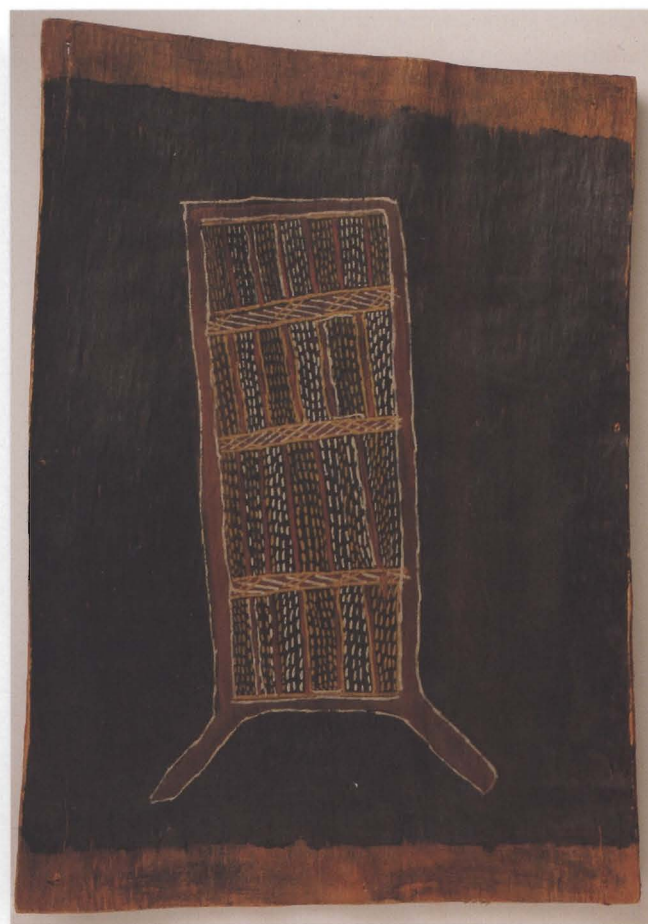
Distinguished by their dense black backgrounds and floating forms more akin to drawing than painting, Groote Eylandt works reflect the rich rock art tradition, the abundance of manganese oxide, and the seafaring lifestyle of the people.¹³ In contrast to the art of north-east and central Arnhem Land, these works do not feature cross-hatching or designs filling the entire painting surface, although there has been a greater tendency since the 1960s towards fuller compositions taking in areas outside the central motifs. As noted by researcher Craig Elliott, infill bands of broken and unbroken lines and dots 'tend to be sympathetic to the observable morphology of the subject', such as the patterns on a crab's carapace or the feathers of a bird.¹⁴

As a sea-going people, the painters demonstrated a deep knowledge of the major constellations, and this is the subject of *The Southern Cross and the coal sack*. A large groper fish called Alakitja 'who swam

in the celestial waters'¹⁵ was speared by two brothers Wanamoumitja who together form Alpha and Beta. After dividing the fish, they cooked their share on their own fires, shown by two white circles near the fish's tail. The glow of these fires are the two stars of the Southern Cross, Delta and Gamma. Recent research has shown that details of this story are unfamiliar to current Groote Eylandters but that Delta and Gamma remain the totems of two different clans, Wamungwamakwula and Wamindilyakwa.

The crab figured in *Crab, Angwala*, attributed to Nambaduba Manimhamanja of the Wurrumaminjamanja clan, is said to belong to another constellation, as well as having strong associations with the formation of topographical features due to its burrowing actions. Angwala, an unmarried sky man, lives alone as a group of small stars at the head of Hydra and also belongs to a pantheon of ancestral creatures who left Groote Eylandt to travel by sea to Bickerton Island, and then to the mainland. Today this story is known only to the mainlanders. Also with strong celestial connections is the bark *Imoraka, the green turtle and canoe*. The sun is referred to locally as the turtle in the sky, and Mamoura, the sun woman. Imoraka (*Chelonia mydas*) travelled from one site to another, leaving totemic rock formations and sand depressions and finally coming to rest at Mamoura-madja, or place of the sun, which is the 'increase site' for the green turtle, and a place of ceremony.

Another mainland connection is described by a mythical journey undertaken by four crows, *ji-inwa (Corvus ceciloë)*, from Rose River, on the western coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, to Bickerton Island. After creating a swamp there, they flew to the Bustard Islands halfway between Groote and Bickerton. This bark painting, *Ji-inwa (crows) at Umwara-dina-madja, Bustard Islands*, is exquisitely composed in a circular formation, echoed and anchored by the outline of a nest in the centre containing the hatchling of the male crow to the right. Large outcrops of stones at Unwara symbolise components of the story of this work.



Journeys of Macassan fishermen from the Indonesian archipelago across the northern coast of Australia are evident in abstract works collected from each of the three camps. This borrowing through intercultural contact shows Aboriginal people's ability to absorb and adapt outside influences to enrich an evolving culture.

The two barks, *Bara, the north-west wind* by Gulbidja Bara and *Mamariga, the south-east wind*, show this cross-cultural fertilisation. Not only do these totemic structures refer specifically to the winds that mark the two major seasons in Arnhem Land (the wet and the dry), which affect food and ceremonial cycles, but they also replicate the shape of the sails of the Macassan praus that are dependent on the same winds for their forward and return journeys. The source of the north-west wind is said to be a totemic tree at Majanja in the middle of Blue Mud Bay. Markings refer to incisions in the tree's bark made to release the ancestral spirits of the Warnungwadarrbulangwa clan that carry *bara*, the wind-forming clouds that accumulate before the wet season. The schematised limbs and rectangular shape of the tree form the central image. At the end of the wet season the people whose totem is *Mamariga* visit Aitja-Wala-madja in the south east of the island and pound on two spear-like rocks with boulders to release the dry-season wind. Borne on these winds are the spirits of the future children of the Wirinikapare moiety who originate from this site. They hide in the tall grass until the father 'dreams' about a spirit child who then enters the womb of one of his wives.

Probably the most intriguing bark painting in terms of individual expression of an everyday subject is *An Aboriginal family*. Distributed liberally over the surface is evidence of a burgeoning extended family. Amongst the number of variously aged children, the father is shown large next to the mother who is suckling an infant. One can only speculate on the significance of the different colours. For instance, it is known that yellow ochre is generally reserved for the most important and



Artist unknown
Australia
An Aboriginal family
1948
Natural pigments
on bark
64 x 35.8cm
Gift of the 1948
American–Australian
Scientific Expedition
to Arnhem Land 1956
Queensland Art Gallery

sacred subjects in non-secular paintings and that white is often associated with the young. There is no reason to assume that the size of the figure is necessarily related to physical size, so some of the yellow figures, although small, may be initiates.

The twelve Groote paintings in the Queensland Art Gallery's Indigenous Art Collection represent the Gallery's only holdings of works from this area. Bark paintings from the island are no longer available to collectors, a demise hastened by the introduction of mining in the 1960s. Although people still paint, the infrastructure for dispersal of the barks is not present. It is fortunate then that three times as many works were collected from this camp than from the other two camps, which continue to be prolific producers of art.

Camp 2 — Yirrkala

We pitched our tents on the crown of a sand hill carpeted with a mat of thick grass .
Before us was an open curving beach .
and behind us a freshwater swamp, shaded by large trees, fringed with luxuriant grasses and intersected with a stream of clear water.¹⁶

The abundance of this area is reflected in the almost abstract painting on card entitled *Swamp*, whilst the sea is depicted in *Death, burial and the journey of the spirit to the land of the dead*. The latter work shows a mortuary ceremony surrounded by swirling white cross-hatching indicating the dust raised by the dancers' feet and the blood flowing from the mourning women's heads as they gash themselves with sharp bones. A canoe, guided by a plover, conveys the spirit of the deceased. Wave patterns of the open sea shimmer in three of the panels, with indications of sand banks shown by bands of white cross-hatching.

A similar degree of abstraction occurs in *Orion and the Pleiades*, in which Orion, symbolically represented by a T-shape, is believed to be a canoe containing Yirritija men and women, shown as dots. A storm drowns them and their catch of whale, fish and turtle, which become part of the Milky Way.

The busier, more erratic surfaces of the Yirrkala works add diversity to the Collection and complement larger, more formal works from this region collected fifteen years after the expedition.

Camp 3 — Gunbalanya

Gunbalanya (incorrectly recorded on Mountford's map as Unbalanja) was the final camp.¹⁷ As predicted by Mountford, it was 'the most spectacular, the most productive and, at the same time the most uncomfortable of our research camps ...'

The area yielded spectacular works which reflected the prevalence of water birds around the numerous billabongs and floodplains of the Alligator River and bats from the heavily wooded areas and caves of the rugged Arnhem Land plateau, as well as other works of related ceremonial designs. In style, the five works from Gunbalanya, painted in natural pigment on card, derive from the ancient tradition of rock art prolific in the region. Yet, as a result of the relative softness of the buff-coloured and ageing card, they have a distinctive, almost ethereal quality. In the *Five royal spoonbills*, birds float in formation across the surface, heads bowed in unison while they eke out sustenance in the soft mud of the swamps with their spatula-shaped bills. Similarly, in *Waterbird* a single motif appears in suspended animation on an unpainted background replicating the plain surface of rock art. Unusually, the minimal quality of the overall composition and the delicate interior patterning of dots and dashes bear a strong resemblance to the Groote Eylandt barks. It is possible that Mountford's intense interest in rock art in both areas influenced his selection of these somewhat similar works.

Under the broad category of spirit people, Mountford collected *Boubit-boubit, the wild honey man*. Although it depicts an intriguing abstract design of the honeycomb, which also appears in ritual body design, this work refers directly to the narrative of the wild honey men. These ancestral beings, looking for the much sought-after wild honey, transgressed the waterhole of the rainbow serpent and were drowned. They now dwell with the honey trees at the bottom of the waterhole

Yirrkala Community
Australia
Death, burial and the journey of the spirit to the land of the dead
1948
Natural pigments on paper
58.5x45.7cm
Gift of the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land 1956
Queensland Art Gallery





Kudjamandi, at the source of the East Alligator River. At about the time of the first rains of the wet season each year, the spirit of an Aboriginal medicine man, armed with powerful chants for protection, will enter the waterhole and collect honey for dispersal to all places around the region. In this schematised version (other figurative depictions were also collected), transverse lines along one side represent beeswax, while two rectangles are masses of honeycomb and two other rectangles are described by Mountford as bee bread (young bees and eggs).

Mardayin or ceremonial designs used for body painting and on carved wooden objects

combines the figuration of the mortuary poles with the abstracted cross-hatching and infill pattern associated more with the Liverpool River people to the east. Mountford was known to draw on artists from this region as the Gunbalanya artists were busily engaged in mission work.¹⁸ He speculates on the links between this Yirritija skin design and similar markings occurring in art by peoples from the Central Celebes who consistently visited these northern coasts from around 1600 to 1907.

Although Milingimbi, a small island two hundred kilometres north-east of Gunbalanya, was not an expedition campsite, two members of the team did make a detour in August 1948 to collect material culture. Archaeologist Frank Setzler from the Smithsonian Institute and anthropologist Frederick McCarthy from the Australian Museum collected some thirty bark paintings,¹⁹ two of which were gifted to the Queensland National Art Gallery. These are among the few barks not collected by Mountford.

Mountford

It is an interesting predicament for an Indigenous curator in the late 1990s to write about a collection of Aboriginal bark and card paintings without also writing about the artists who produced them. Although several names were retrieved during contact with the communities in the preparation of this paper, by virtue of historic circumstances one finds oneself discussing the man responsible for

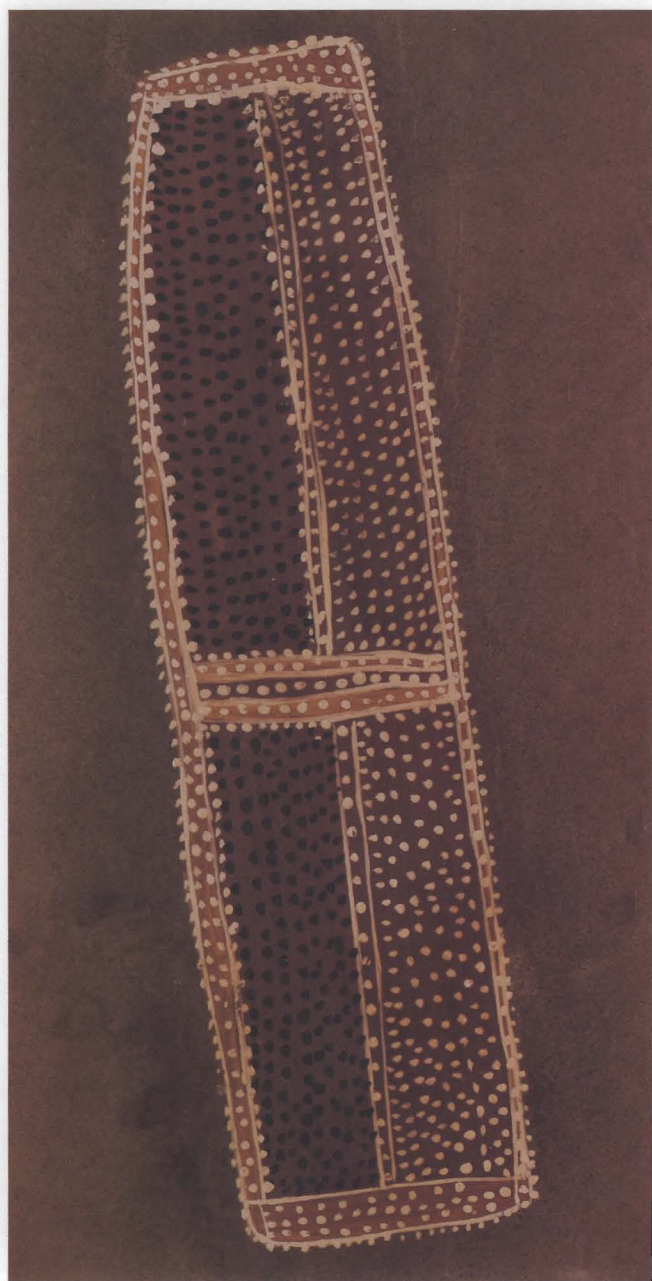
collecting the paintings: a man who has become notorious for not documenting the identities of the artists and for providing detailed, but sometimes wildly inaccurate descriptions of the work; a man whose name has become inextricably linked with the collection, which is more commonly referred to as the Mountford Collection rather than the correct title of the AASEAL Collection.

We are dealing with bark paintings collected in 1948, by a cultural explorer of sorts, whom the press of the day described as venturing into the geographic and artistic unknown. Not only does this dilemma expose the changes in the collection and reception of Aboriginal art over the past decades, it also reveals the extent to which this venture was a catalyst for those changes. Although the Aboriginal missions had been marketing specific Indigenous art forms for some time, and the burgeoning world of Australian anthropological studies was active in academic documentation, it was the popular reception of information about the Mountford expedition that made a difference. As Philip Jones has pointed out, the influence of Charles Mountford's collecting activities on national and international perceptions of Aboriginal art should not be underestimated.²⁰

Mountford was a self-made man who left school at eleven and spent the next twenty years trying to better himself through a range of menial jobs and night studies. Without professional qualifications, Mountford was viewed as a maverick outside the anthropological establishment and was the target of criticism and obstruction from some powerful members of the profession.

We had a lot of trouble getting the expedition through, because here was I with the status of little more than a telephone mechanic, taking out *the biggest scientific expedition in history* (my italics), and what the academic world tried to do to me was nobody's business! Dear, dear, dear! However I took it out and brought it back.²¹

Against this peer resistance, Mountford became a photographer, filmmaker, broadcaster, author of seven books,



international promoter and populariser of Aboriginal art and life, and a recipient of a great number of distinguished awards. He participated in nine expeditions, including the AASEAL, which he also initiated.

Despite Mountford's claim to be merely a recorder of Aboriginal culture, his work as the leader of the 1948 expedition and the author of the publication that followed was regarded as an unwelcome incursion into the serious world of Sydney-based anthropology. Ronald M. Berndt, a pre-eminent anthropologist, supported by his equally eminent wife Catherine Berndt, and Professor R. Elkin, at that time Head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, condemned Charles Mountford in a review of his publication on the expedition (*Art, Myth and Symbolism*) in the influential journal *Mankind* in 1958. It was as sharp an academic autopsy as one could get away with in print: 'Apart from the acknowledged value of this book in making available to us a great number of illustrations ... it has little to commend it', wrote Berndt,²² who then systematically demolished the contents in detail, attracting a number of letters to the editor of *Mankind* over subsequent issues.²³

Karel Kupka, the renowned French anthropologist who championed Aboriginal art in his pioneering book *The Dawn of Art* (1956), also came under criticism in the same review for his so-called 'misrepresentations of the art and culture of Arnhem Landers'. Interestingly, Kupka's advocacy of the exhibition of bark paintings in art galleries caused him to comment positively, in a 1956 issue of *Oceania*, on the lead the Queensland National Art Gallery was taking in this regard and he urged 'other public art galleries to follow (their) example'.²⁴

It could be argued that because Mountford was not inducted into the anthropological way of seeing and recording, he was able to occupy and champion a relatively unexplored, but hardly 'illegitimate' terrain, exhibited in his scrutiny of bark paintings as art objects rather than as anthropological specimens. In a catalogue essay for artist James Cant's exhibition of

drawings of rock art in Melbourne in 1949, one year after the Arnhem Land expedition, Mountford, in defence of his outsider position, bemoaned the fact that:

it was the scientist rather than the painter who studied 'primitive art' and therefore approached the subject intellectually rather than emotionally ... The designs are analysed, compared, their sequences ascertained, and their ages estimated. But in such painstaking investigations one finds little appreciation of beauty, of balance in colour and form, or of appeal to the senses.²⁵

Mountford's interest in art can be traced to the 1920s when he first became aware of the Indigenous art of Central Australia. He later became a champion of Albert Namatjira, who was the subject of a popular film that Mountford co-produced with Axel Poignant in 1947. Following this there were several editions of a book he wrote on Namatjira, first published by the Bread and Cheese Club, Melbourne, in 1944, and later the publication of his photographs of rock and bark art appeared in the 1954 Unesco World Art Series. The impact of these accessible forms of 'ethnographic' information on the public imagination cannot be discounted. *The National Geographic Magazine*, which published Mountford's papers on his Arnhem Land activities, had an impressive worldwide distribution (around 1.8 million by 1949) and was renowned for reaching a general audience.²⁶

People like Mountford were part of a growing number of 'amateurs' being thrown into relief during the 1950s as a result of Australia's reassessment of its position in the postwar era. 'Handling' of race was high on the agenda, with the 1951 appointment of Paul Hasluck to a new position concentrated on Aboriginal affairs — the Minister for Territories. Established canons were being challenged and terms like *assimilation*, *citizenship* and *human rights* were being bandied about, attracting the attention of the United Nations. During this decade the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League was formed (1957) and international calls for the promotion of 'understanding between peoples' created a climate in which the field for 'looking at' Aboriginal people and

culture moved beyond anthropology. General and more specialised books and films by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Film Australia textured the viewing surface and popularised the names of photographers and filmmakers such as Axel Poignant and Cecil Holmes. Both men had a strong interest in art and were also seen as somewhat renegade, working as they did across disciplines, and therefore not fully initiated into their own 'tribe'.²⁷

Mountford's accessible and commercially successful rhetoric, within a field dominated by men and women of science, was bound to cause outcries of 'illegitimacy'. Although he maintained the conventions of the time by exploiting terminology that emphasised the 'primitive',²⁸ his broad activities, including over sixty-five publications from 1928 to the early 1970s, were generally respectful of Aboriginal cultures. Consequently, the dispersal across the nation's art galleries of the 'bastard barks' collected by the Mountford-led AASEAL expedition was a milestone event that should be fully acknowledged within Australian art history.

Margo Neale is the Curator of Indigenous Australian Art at the Queensland Art Gallery.

Left
Oenpelli Community
Australia
Five royal spoonbills
1948
Natural pigments
on paper
58.5x45.7cm
Gift of the 1948
American–Australian
Scientific Expedition
to Arnhem Land 1956
Queensland Art Gallery

Oenpelli Community
Australia
*Boubit-boubit, the wild
honey man* 1948
Natural pigments on
paper mounted on card
57.2x45.4cm
Gift of the 1948
American–Australian
Scientific Expedition
to Arnhem Land 1956
Queensland Art Gallery