



Abstraction

[in Arnhem Land bark painting]

Howard Morphy

The title of this exhibition — *Old Masters: Australia's Great Bark Artists* — is based on analogy. It is deliberately provocative. At first sight it could be argued that it is taking Aboriginal art out of its context. Implicitly it places the bark painters of Arnhem Land within the frame of European art history, moving the artists away from the religious and ceremonial context of artistic production in the forests, flood plains and escarpments of Arnhem Land. Surely, old masters are part of the history of European art, exemplars of traditions, founders of schools, people of established reputations, renowned for the important innovations they made? In bringing Aboriginal art into world art history we need such provocations to think beyond our preconceptions — to see what art and artists might share in common cross-culturally, and to become aware of what we have routinely overlooked.

The artists in this exhibition were nearly all born well before the intensive colonisation of their country in the first half of the 20th century. They worked in a number of different, sometimes overlapping, traditions and developed their abilities over many years. They began to learn the skills of art-making at an early age by assisting more senior artists in producing paintings in various media — on log coffins, bark shelters and rock walls, and on the human body. They learnt the techniques of painting, becoming accomplished in the painstaking skill of crosshatching. They became aware of the subtle effects produced by applying earth pigments in different combinations and sequences, and learnt to appreciate the aesthetic qualities and cultural significance of the ochre palette. They learnt the meaning of a range of geometric designs and how to produce the figurative outlines that differentiate one animal species from another, or that mark the characteristics of spirit beings in human form. In western Arnhem Land, training required being able to mark the distinguishing features of the myriad fish species that swim in the rivers and coastal waters, and of the birds and animal species of the forests and flood plains.¹

From the perspective of European categories, the Arnhem Land artists painted in a number of styles, some of which are characteristic of particular regions. In the X-ray art of western Arnhem Land, internal organs and skeletal features are depicted within the beautifully delineated outlines of animals. Eastern Arnhem Land sacred paintings cover the entire surface of the bark with complex geometric clan designs, bordering onto schematic, often monochrome, figurative representations of animal and human forms. But within each region there is considerable diversity — different styles are used in different contexts for different purposes.

The term 'abstract' in Western art history tends to be applied to paintings of predominantly geometric forms, or to images without obvious external referents. Abstract art, which coincidentally emerged around the time Walter Baldwin Spencer first collected bark paintings in Arnhem Land, adopted an analytical perspective on previous traditions, emphasising the formal and expressive properties of line, shape and colour. Abstraction followed figuration, both in movements such as cubism and abstract expressionism and in the work of individual artists, such as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock and Tony Tuckson. Some have regarded this trajectory as 'progressive'. In Aboriginal art, one can see the same dialogue between figurative and non-figurative art, between representational and abstract art, but there is no simple sense in which one follows the other in time. Both are present