

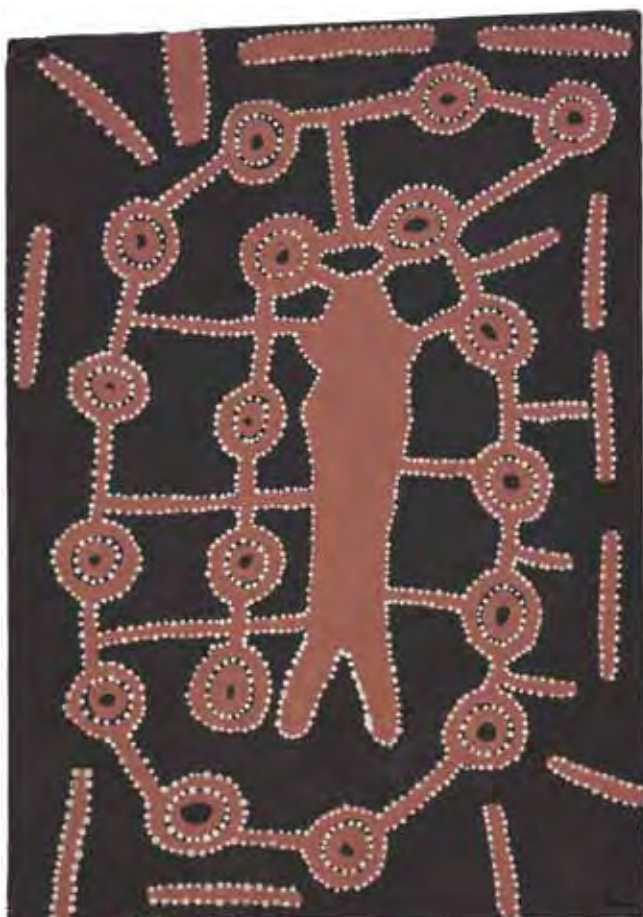
Representing an era

History of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Art collection

In 2005, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Amendment Bill was passed into law, abolishing ATSIC and its companion agency, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS). Many decisions followed, but one that would prove to be important to the National Museum of Australia involved ATSIC's corporate assets. In particular, the numerous artworks and other objects that had brought life and colour to the walls of ATSIC offices across the country. More than 2000 artworks and objects came under the control of the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC), following the abolition of ATSIC. OIPC later transferred the entire collection to the National Museum of Australia.

The collection draws its name from the all the departments and organisations with which it was associated. Many of these artworks were acquired by bodies that pre-dated the creation of ATSIC in 1989. These other bodies included the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and the Aboriginal Development Commission. They were involved in the administration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs at different times following the 1967 Referendum; and many of the older works that ATSIC held were acquired while these bodies were active.

Barry Dexter, who was Executive Member of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Director of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs and later Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, confirmed



Untitled painting by Charlie Tjararu Tjungurrayi



Coffee set with ATSIC logo from the ATSIC office in Nhulunbuy

that these bodies did acquire many artworks over a 38-year period. There was no specific budget put aside for buying artworks. However, towards the end of the financial year, if there was any money left unspent, then artworks were bought. In fact, it had been an unofficial policy that only paintings and objects by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be displayed in the offices.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were the very early days of the Aboriginal art movements. The Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, formed by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, actively promoted the growth of art centres in remote areas. The collection includes many wonderful paintings and carvings from



Yvonne Koolmatricie



The ATSIAA collection in the National Museum of Australia storeroom



this early period. These include such significant artists as Narritjin Maymura and Yirwala; Western Desert artists Kaapa Tjanpitjinpa, Long Jack Phillipus and Johnny Warangkula; and Hermannsburg artists including Oscar, Keith and Ewald Namatjira.

When ATSC was formed, it continued to support the arts by collecting and promoting the work of Indigenous artists. This happened at a local office level as well as through the national programs that supported Indigenous arts.

The material collected from the regional offices clearly shows a local flavour, with the artists and makers of the area often well represented. For example, the Adelaide office had displayed two beautiful pieces of batik by a key South Australian artist, Nyukana 'Daisy' Baker, and fibre work by celebrated Yvonne Koolmatrice. The Perth office held paintings by Shane Pickett and Tjyllyungoo (also known as Lance Chadd), as well as other artists from the Carrollup school. The Nhulunbuy office included a hollow log coffin by Galpu man Djalu Gurriwiwi.



Mortuary Ceremony, bark painting by Narritjin Maymura



The regional offices were also likely to have recent works, whereas the Canberra and Sydney ATSC offices seemed to hold, as a general rule, a selection that was representative of the early growth of the art movement, obtained through the collections of the earlier departments.

One of the great values of this collection is that it provides a snapshot of the art practice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities during the period from 1967 to 2005. As well it gives us some insights into the history of the era. Among the more than 2000 items are objects that give a glimpse into the organisations that held these things: ATSC sports trophies; NAIDOC awards and other such things; gifts from visiting overseas delegations; reproductions of historic photographs; paintings made in workshops or for instructional reasons — Alison Anderson's painting *Corporate Flow Chart* — or for health reasons — *Sad Boys Sniffing Petrol* or *The Day the Bottle of Wine Was Opened*. The Nhulunbuy office included a set of handpainted mugs, a milk jug and sugar dish with the ATSC logo alongside local designs.

This is an important collection that represents more than the sum of its parts — and one that deserves to be seen by a large audience.

The main object categories represented in the collection are as follows:

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| paintings on canvas and board (486) | wood carvings (51) |
| works on paper (346) | ceramics (49) |
| bark paintings (179) | coolamons (41) |
| spears, spear-throwers (118) | fabrics (40) |
| boomerangs (103) | shields (31) |
| photographs — original and reproductions (102) | clapping sticks (20) |
| fibre, woven plant material (98) | didjeridus (19) |
| posters — fine art and promotional (87) | reproductions of historic print (5) |
| | cartoons, original drawings (4) |

Andy Greenlade, Curator, ASTIP