

Ancestral Power and the Aesthetic

Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection

A Museum Victoria touring exhibition curated by Lindy Allen, Senior Curator (Anthropology - Northern Australia), Museum Victoria

Ancestral Power and the Aesthetic is the first exhibition to give focus to the extraordinary painted works collected from Arnhem Land 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 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 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 in July 1936 Thomson stayed another 17 months and then visited again in 1942 and 1943. He took over 2500 photographs, wrote more than 1500 pages of field notes and amassed around 4500 objects.

Donald Thomson’s field writings reveal the complexities associated with the distinctive patterning on these works and the tenets that underpin a uniquely Yolngu artistic practice. Thomson would learn the intrinsic importance of the *minytji*, the term used to refer to these designs and patterning. It is the embodiment of totemic clan ancestors or *wangarr* and the fine aesthetic quality sought and achieved in Yolngu painting or the ‘brilliance’ known as *bir’yun* was intended to capture the essence of the *wangarr* and harness its strength and power or *marr*.

The works in the exhibition comprise 20 extraordinary bark paintings and a selection of painted objects drawn from the hundreds of men’s ceremonial objects in the Donald Thomson Collection from Arnhem Land together with artists’ tools and pigments. The painted works serve to illustrate the diversity of *mardayin minytji* or sacred ancestral clan designs, and the differences in painting styles between clans of the Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties and between central and eastern Arnhem Land are reflected in the exhibition.

The paintings include work of legendary men like the Djapu leader Wonggu, including the very first one that Donald Thomson collected from Wonggu soon after arriving at Caledon Bay in July 1935. Other examples are drawn from a series of ceremonial body designs painted on bark for Donald Thomson in late 1936 and early 1937 at Gaartji in central Arnhem Land; while others are selected from another suite completed at the base camp of the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU) set up by Donald Thomson in 1942.

Requirements and Specifications:

Structural components	Permanent or portable wall to separate exhibition into two parts where possible
Objects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 bark paintings • (10 from central Arnhem Land; 10 from Ntheast Arnhem Land) 2 painted conical baskets 2 painted smoking pipes 1 painted clapstick

	1 painted message stick 1 incised paddle 3 ochre samples 2 paint brushes 2 stone palettes 1 string bag and contents
Object supports	Mounts provided for bark paintings, paddle and two baskets
Interactives	Nil
Lighting	Venues to provide
Plinths	Venues to provide two plinths for 2 works
Graphics	Labels for 36 objects Extended labels for 15 objects 5 text panels – introduction, Central Arnhem Land, Eastern Arnhem Land + 2 contextual/thematic panels Acknowledgements panel Panel with map Title panel
Images	1 x Blackwood frame and mounted silver gelatin print Dimensions : 890 x 660 x 45 mm
Showcases	Venues to provide display cases and barriers or acrylic tops for protection of 3D works (to be negotiated with each venue)
Multimedia	Considering development of audio/dvd product
Particular building requirements	High level of security and environmental conditions to be met
Security	All works are valuable and irreplaceable heritage items and risk management strategy to be developed with venues to ensure protection from theft and/or damage
Large Objects	The majority of the bark paintings are exceptionally large (note dimensions in list of works) and crates (dimensions below)
Crates	All works and graphics will be delivered in 7 to 8 crates that need to be stored in a clean pest-free environment at venues - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 @ H: 64.6 x L: 152.1 W:93.2cm 1 @ H: 64.6 x L: 160.6 W:98.2cm 1 @ H: 64.6 x L: 192.1 W:144.6cm 1 @ H: 74.6 x L: 177.4 W:89.8cm 1 @ H: 54.6 x L: 214.5 W:134.6cm 1 @ H: 59.6 x L: 135.1 W:94.1cm 1 – 3D works 1 – Graphics (dimensions for crates 7. & 8. pending)
Catalogue/book	Available for venues to sell (size, format, RRP are yet to be determined)
Exhibition brochure and education kit	These products to be developed by Museum Victoria and provided to venues (electronic and hard copy)
Visitor Survey	MV will provide a template for assessing audience response to the exhibition and development of new audiences
Exhibition fee	Rate to be confirmed
Valuation	\$5.5 million
Installation	MV will provide a conservator to condition report at each venue
Publicity	MV will provided a template media release, invitation card/text and PR images

Catalogue of works in the exhibition:

Documentation on the Donald Thomson Collection is incomplete in parts. Where artists' names or artwork titles are absent, they 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. 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 11.6 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

Djambarrpuyngu 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 Djambarrpuyngu 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 design) 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, 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' minytji (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 djalkurk (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 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 Goannas) 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

Djimbaryun 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

Djimbaryun Ngurruwuthun

born c. 1900, died c. 1960

Munyuku clan, Yirritja moiety

Dhulwung (Sacred Fern) story 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

33
Ratjpa (red ochre)
 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
