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**Ancestral power and the aesthetic:
Arnhem Land paintings and objects
from the Donald Thomson Collection**

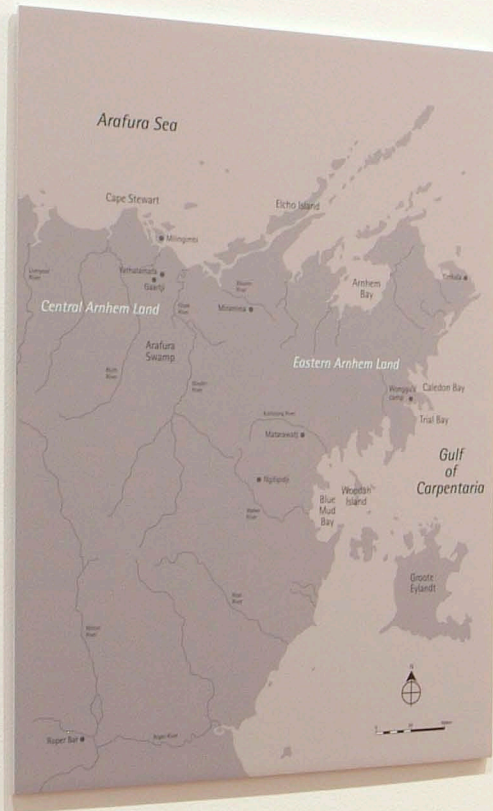
This is the first exhibition to focus on the extraordinary painted works from Arnhem Land collected by University of Melbourne anthropologist, the late Professor Donald Thomson (1901–1970). The quality, unique nature and inherent importance of the sixty-nine bark paintings together with the hundreds of Yolngu men's ceremonial 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 for the first time 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 to Arnhem Land in July 1936, Donald Thomson stayed another seventeen months and visited again in 1942 and 1943. He took over 2500 photographs, wrote more than 1500 pages of field-notes and amassed around 4500 objects.

Thomson's field writings reveal the complexities associated with the artworks' distinctive patterning or *minyiji*, and the tenets that underpin a uniquely Yolngu artistic practice. Thomson would learn of the intrinsic importance of *minyiji* as the embodiment of totemic clan ancestors called *wanggarr*. The fine aesthetic quality sought and achieved in Yolngu painting—a 'shine' or 'brilliance' called *bir'yuw*—was intended to capture the essence of the *wanggarr* and harness its strength and power or *marr*.

The works in the exhibition illustrate the diversity of *mardayin minyiji* or sacred ancestral clan designs. The exhibition layout reflects differences in painting styles between artists of Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties (the Yolngu kinship and religious structure), with artworks by Dhuwa men displayed opposite work by Yirritja men. Works from central and eastern Arnhem Land are shown in separate galleries, revealing regional distinctions.

Lindy Allen
Exhibition curator



Yolngu bark painting, circa 1930s. The painting depicts a central figure surrounded by various symbols and patterns, characteristic of Yolngu art. It is part of the Donald Thomson Collection.

