The Aboriginal Memorial is an installation of 200 hollow log coffins from Central Arnhem Land. It commemorates all the indigenous people who, since 1788, have lost their lives defending their land. The artists who created this installation intended that it be located in a public place where it could be preserved for future generations. The Aboriginal Memorial is prominently displayed in the first room of the National Gallery of Australia.

The Aboriginal Memorial Project

1988 marked the Bicentenary of Australia — a celebration of 200 years of European settlement — yet many indigenous Australians felt that there was little to celebrate. The Bicentenary elicited varied responses from both white and black Australia. Whilst it provoked widespread boycott and protest, the stage was set for indigenous people to demonstrate the resilience and vitality of their culture, and to invite the public to share in the celebration of that culture’s endurance.

The Aboriginal Memorial was inspired by this political climate. At the time, Djan Mundine was Art Adviser in Ramingining in Central Arnhem Land. The idea for the project was triggered when Mundine saw a video of John Pilger’s documentary, ‘The Secret Country’, in which Pilger talks of the decimation of a tribal group who owned land on the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales, and who died ‘to the last man, woman and child defending their country’. Pilger later says, ‘indeed, in a land strewn with cenotaphs which honour the memory of Australian servicemen who have died in almost every corner of the earth, not one stands for those [first Australians] who fought and fell in defence of their own country.’

‘In the course of my work at Ramingining, the major role [was] to make the world more aware and appreciative of Aboriginal art and culture’, Mundine has said. He initiated the Aboriginal Memorial project: an installation of 200 hollow log coffins, one for each year of European settlement, representing a forest of souls, a war cemetery and the final rites for all Aboriginal people who have been denied a proper burial. Mundine approached a small group of senior artists including Paddy Dhathangu, George Milpurrum, Jimmy Wululu and David Malangi. The project grew to include 43 artists, both male and female, from Ramingining and its surrounds in Central Arnhem Land.

In 1987 the Memorial was offered to the National Gallery of Australia, but at that stage the project was in its infancy. The National Gallery therefore agreed to commission the installation to enable the artists — most of whom are professional bark painters, sculptors and weavers — to complete the project. The Memorial was initially shown in Sydney at the Biennale of 1988, ‘From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c.1940-88’.

Arnhem Land

Stretching from the East Alligator River in the Northern Territory to the Gulf of Carpentaria, Arnhem Land covers an area of some 150,000 square kilometres. It was declared a reserve for Aboriginal people in 1931. Today Arnhem Land is owned by Aboriginal people under Commonwealth laws. Several remote communities — some of which began as missions, others as government settlements — are spread through the region. Ramingining township has a population of approximately 1,000, including the small populations in surrounding outstations. Whilst Arnhem Land people (who, in the central and eastern areas, refer to themselves collectively as Yolngu, meaning human beings) have adopted some elements of European culture, they also continue their traditional practices, including ceremonial activity.
The Hollow Log Ceremony

The Aboriginal Memorial installation is inspired by the hollow log or bone coffin mortuary ceremony of Central Arnhem Land. Most commonly known as the dupun ceremony, it is also known, according to language, as lorrkon, djajambu, badurru, mulukuridja, mulutu and larajee. Though similar to the burial practices of Aborigines in other parts of Australia, the hollow log ceremony is unique to Arnhem Land. The purpose of the ceremony is to ensure the safe arrival of the spirit of the deceased on its perilous journey from the earth to the land of the dead.

Traditionally in Arnhem Land, when a person dies the body is ritually painted with relevant totemic designs, sung over and mourned. It is then taken to the deceased’s clan land, and is either buried or placed on a platform in a tree and left to decompose. The bones are recovered later (this can be months or even years later) and a hollow log ceremony is performed. A tree, naturally hollowed out by termites, is cut down, cleaned and, in a ceremonial camp, is painted with the clan’s totemic designs. The bones of the deceased are painted with red ochre and, during special dances, placed inside the log. The larger bones and skull are broken before being inserted. The coffin is danced into the main camp, placed upright and the final songs and dances performed. It is then left to the elements, and the burial cycle is complete.

At no time did the log coffins in the Memorial contain bones, nor were they used in a mortuary ceremony. Like sculptures from Aboriginal Australia in galleries, they were made as works of art for public display.

Materials

Arnhem Land artists are renowned for bark painting; their paintings have been collected by Europeans since the mid-19th century. The Memorial reflects the art traditions of Central Arnhem Land showing a variety of styles, designs and materials.

The palette of red, yellow, white and black is created with natural pigments. Ochre is mined locally from quarries and sometimes traded over long distances. Yellow ochre, when wrapped in paperbark and put on hot coals, turns red. The white pigment is kaolin or pipe clay. The black is generally charcoal, although it is not uncommon for artists to use the carbon from dry cell batteries to achieve a deep black. Previously, painters employed natural gums and resins such as native orchid juice, tree sap, wax or the yolk of birds’ eggs to bind the powdery pigments. The chalky quality apparent on some of the hollow logs in the Memorial is a result of using such natural binders. Since the 1960s, however, most artists have favoured commercially available wood glues as a binder, giving a more stable painted surface.

Artists make brushes known as marwar (meaning hair), comprised of several long strands of human hair connected to a short twig. For intricate work such as crosshatching, the artist draws the long thin brush away from the body. This crosshatching, so common to Arnhem Land clan designs, is commonly known as rank, and is also called miny ‘ji or dhulang towards the east.

The Memorial Installation

The path through the Memorial imitates the course of the Glyde River estuary which flows through the Arafura Swamp to the sea. The hollow log coffins are situated broadly according to where the artists’ clans live along the river and its tributaries.

The different styles apparent in groupings are related to the artists’ social groups (sometimes described as clans) which link people by or to a common ancestor, land, language and strict social affiliations. All clans belong to a moiety ie. one of two complementary halves of society: Dhuwe and Yirritja. All such affiliations play a part in Aboriginal artists’ inherited right to paint an established set of designs belonging to their social group; this inheritance is, in fact, the artist’s copyright over imagery. In Arnhem Land, the right to paint is usually inherited patrilineally, although many artists paint their mother’s story too. The designs on the hollow logs in the Memorial are the same themes that these artists paint on bark and on people’s bodies in ceremony.

Hollow logs made for a burial ceremony are large. Smaller hollow logs may be made to keep the bones of the deceased at the home of the family for a period of time. The hollow logs can also represent the deceased person — the designs on the log are the same as the designs painted on the body during the burial rites. Many of the hollow logs have a small hole either carved or painted towards the top. Yolngu believe that this provides the soul of the deceased with a viewing hole to look through and survey the land.

Yolngu believe that to achieve a shimmering brilliance in painting through crosshatching and line work — giving a ‘singing’ quality to the imagery — is to evoke ancestral power. Artists from nine groups worked on the Memorial, and, whilst clan designs follow strict conventions ruling subject matter, each individual artist’s hand is apparent.

As you move through the Memorial, you will witness the imagery from changing environments — from the lands of the salt water people, further inland to the country of the freshwater people. The natural environment and its phenomena are vital to the Yolngu’s clan identity.

‘We Yolngu belong to different bairpurr [clan groups] and each bairpurr paints things differently; it depends if you come from the gunukuuy [mangroves] or dilulpuy [forests] or rangipuy [beach] … It’s important to know the difference and we need to teach the young people to paint in this way because they don’t know. I teach them by painting a picture so they learn to see the difference,” says George Mulpurruru.

The work is unified by an array of common themes: celebration of life, respect for the dead and mortuary traditions and people’s connection with ancestral beings. Themes of transition and regeneration within Aboriginal culture pervade the Memorial. On a wider scale, the Aboriginal Memorial also marks a watershed in the history of Australian society. Whilst it is intended as a war memorial, it is also a historical statement, a testimony to the resilience of indigenous people and culture in the face of great odds, and a legacy for future generations of Australians.

Susan Jenkins
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NOTES
The Aboriginal Memorial was moved to this location and configuration early 1998. This map reflects the change, pending the printing of a new brochure.
Liyagawumirr/Manyarrnu People

Balmibi People

The Liyagawumirr and the Manyarrnu people inhabit marshy coastal country. At the entrance of the Memorial, their striking banded poles correspond to this group’s location at the junction of the Hutchinson Strait and the Glyde River estuary. Liya means head, and gawumirr muddy water — the group live at the head of the river where the tidal flats become muddy. Artists Tony Dhanyula and Mick Daypuruyn pay homage to the cycles of nature. The bands on the poles represent tidal marks on tree trunks, which record the rise and fall of successive tides. The ancestral Djan’kawu Sisters, who created the original people as they travelled through the country, are represented by the ‘union jack’ motif on some of the hollow logs.

Manyarrnu means people of the manyar (mangrove) trees. David Malangi records his country of mudflats, salt pans, water goannas and shell fish. Malangi also paints the Balmibi Dreamings of his mother’s group, centred around Yathalamarra waterhole and Murayana the Honey Spirit who performed the first Yirritja hollow log ceremony. Yolgu clan waterholes thrive with many forms of life, such as eel-tailed catfish, diver ducks, long-necked tortoises, water pythons, waterlily leaves and bulbs. These places, such as Yathalamarra, are believed to be where the souls of the unborn dwell and the place to which part of the souls of the deceased return after death. Gurrurrngu, he great ancestral hunter; Darpa, the King Brown Snake; Wak (crows) and other figures relate the theme of death and mortuary rites.

Gupapuyngu People

The Gupapuyngu clan are “top of the river” people — gupa means neck, and is also a synonym for river. Jimmy Wuluwu’s intricate images of totemic beings, such as Ginglyl the eel-tailed catfish and Minhala the long-necked tortoise, reflect on life and death. Transparent, newborn catfish, their bones visible, are a ready target for coromorants diving for food. This action is repeated in a dance in the djalambu ceremony — as in life, the birds carry away the fish. The distinctive herringbone pattern on these poles represents the skeleton of the catfish. These symbols of new life and death appear simultaneously. Wuluwu also depicts honey of the Yirritja moiety, visible in the diamond design representing the cells of a beehive.

Malarrn/Wolgupuy — Murrungun People

The Malarrn/Wolgupuy—Murrungun people have the Morning Star as their major totem. Malarrn means devil ray, and these people come from the Crocodile Islands and neighbouring shores of the Arafura Sea. The Wolgupuy—Murrungun are related to the Nganagalale shark and Banumbangur, the place of the Morning Star, on the Glyde River. An abundance
of local species are depicted on these hollow logs — goannas, yams and rifle fish from up the river; sea urchins, sea snakes, moonfish, barracuda and sawfish from the Arafura Sea. The distinguishing features of the poles in this section are the upper protrusions. The artists have depicted sawfish and barracuda on the hollow logs, and extend the carved prongs at the top to represent the fish’s jaws. The hollow log itself takes on the form of the fish; and, as these predator fish swallow smaller fish, so is the coffin the container of souls.

**Marrangu – Wurrkiganydjarr People**

The Marrangu-Wurrkiganydjarr are people of the eucalyptus forest. Wurrkiganydjarr literally means flower power, and this group is also known as the sugarbag (honey) people. Yarrpany, wild honey of the Dhuwa moiety, and Mewal, the honey ancestor, are depicted on many of the hollow logs by Jimmy Moduk, as are human figures, hives in trees and honey-collecting implements, such as stone axes, dilly bags, mops and ladles. Bush creatures and features abound: bennicoots, wallabies, geckos, blanket lizards, goannas, trees, flowers, insects, stones and rocks. As well, many lagoon species are shown, such as salmon catfish, garfish, spangled perch, file snakes and water weed.

**Wulaki People**

Toby Gabalga represents the Wulaki people from Gatji lagoon, who share a mother–child (yathu yindi) relationship with the neighbouring Marrangu–Wurrkiganydjarr people. Images of tortoises, snakes and waterlily leaves record freshwater lagoon life. The lagoon is said to have been created by the Diver Duck spirit who dived down to split the ground, forming the waterhole.

**Galpu/Liyagalawumirr/Wagalag/Wudumin People**

The Galpu/Liyagalawumirr/Wagalag/Wudumin people are linked by the major Dhuwa moiety theme of Witij the Olive Python. Liyagalawumirr literally means people with bark over their heads (as a shelter). Neville Nanyijawuy and Philip Guthaykudthay’s imagery is concerned with the Milky Way Story. Nanyijawuy graphically depicts the main elements of this story: Glider Possum, spangled perch and fish bones, Crow and the Fish Trap. Guthaykudthay’s abstracted landscapes map the scene where the narrative is played out. Paddy Dhatangu, although represented by only one log coffin, was nonetheless one of the main initiators of the Memorial.
Ganalbingu People

The Ganalbingu are swamp people or Magpie Goose people. The name of their clan, Gurrumba Gurrumba, literally means a flock of geese.

At the end of the monsoon season in April each year, magpie geese in their thousands rest in the shallow waters of the Arafura Swamp. The plethora of natural species are celebrated here: fish, waterlilies, their leaves and bulbs, edible tubers, water birds, long-necked tortoises, frogs and spiders. George Milpurruru documents the secular and ritual significance of these ancestral species and natural forces. Karritjarra the Water Python, and Lungurru, the Yirritja north-east wind (depicted in repeated chevron patterns) that sweeps across the land, bring the first rains of the monsoon. The Flying Fox is depicted both graphically and in abstract form — the flower-like design represents the droppings of this totemic animal.

Rembarrnga People

Rembarrnga clan country lies to the south and west of Ramingining, towards the Katherine area. It is the inland stone country, marked by rocky outcrops and sweeping plains as the landscape gives way to the sandstone escarpment country of West Arnhem Land. The rugged nature of this environment is reflected in the materials used and the execution of the hollow logs from this region. Crosshatching is largely dispensed with, in favour of bold, painterly white on black. Again, the creatures depicted abound in the landscape: goannas, tortoises, snakes, yabbies, barramundi, frogs, snakes, spiders and yams. As well, their internal organs are made visible — a practice of artists further to the west. Paddy Fordham Wainburanga’s almost menacing imagery is concerned with the epic encounters of ancestors by which the features of the landscape were created, particularly Rainbow Serpents in various guises, and split figures. Themes of regurgitation, metamorphosis and renewal are prevalent in these poles.

Kuninjku People

The Kuninjku people inhabit country of abundant freshwater resources — the area west of Ramingining around the Liverpool River. The noticeable shift in Mawumndjul’s painting style reflects the transition to the West Arnhem Land approach to painting, characterised by fields of dynamic rank (crosshatching) across the surface. These designs, like the images on all the hollow logs in the Memorial, have close links to the tradition of body painting for ceremony.
The Aboriginal Memorial

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