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Jaynie Anderson

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# The Creation of Indigenous Collections in Melbourne: How Kenneth Clark, Charles Mountford, and Leonhard Adam Interrogated Australian Indigeneity

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- 1 In the 1940s the cultural landscape of Australia was transformed by a group of intellectuals of the Diaspora, who came from Europe and were fascinated by what they found in the Antipodes. Their activities constitute an important part of the critical reception of indigenous art, whether it was ancient rock art or paintings on bark. The decade of the 1940s is a period when those involved in creating the disciplines of art history, anthropology, and archaeology, defined and collected an important part of Australia's patrimony. Many of the participants came to Australia in the aftermath of the Second World War
- 2 A rather surprising figure in this context was Kenneth Clark – a traveler rather than an immigrant. After his resignation as director of the National Gallery, London, Clark (fig. 1) was appointed adviser to the Felton Bequest for acquisitions of European art for the National Gallery of Victoria, at the suggestion of his friend and protégée, Joseph Burke, newly appointed in 1946 as the professor of art history in Melbourne, the first Herald Chair of Fine Arts. At the beginning of Clark's appointment he travelled to Australia to spend half a year exploring the continent.
- 3 After his return, on March 26, 1949, Clark wrote to Bernhard Berenson to give his frank impressions of the Antipodes, revealing an unexpected passion for indigenous bark painting in the Museum of Melbourne:
- 4 'My dear BB', Clark wrote:

[...] I enjoyed Australia far more than I had expected to do. I find it hard to explain why without seeming patronising, but the brilliant climate seems to have had a

magical effect on the Anglo Saxons, removing their inhibitions and hypocrisies. However, they are very naïve—hardly out of the pioneering stage, but they are a gifted people, only held back by laziness. It was fascinating to be in an entirely democratic country, without even the respect for wealth, or start of dispossession of the USA. The landscape[...] is most beautiful and I can only convey it by saying that it is like a Piero della Francesca. The grass is white, the trunks of the trees pinkish white, the leaves glaucous, exactly as in the *Baptism*. The light comes through the leaves, so the woods are all lilac - like the most extreme Impressionist Renoir's of the late 70's. It is a country for painters, and in fact they have quite good ones—at least no more than anywhere else in these years of dearth. Jane has told you of my enthusiasm for the aboriginal paintings. They are extraordinary, and totally unlike African bushman drawings or the Palaeolithic cave paintings. They do not represent a total impression of moment, but an analytic. As you know the Australian aboriginal always draws the inside of his subject as well as the out, and he makes the heart, liver, intestines etc. with a decorative pattern. Most of the paintings are life-size, on bark lined with white clay. By some freak the Abos had what we call perfect taste - all their objects have pretty, delicate colouring, and their fantasies are gentle, whereas those of the neighbouring Papuans are ugly and violent. Altogether, a study of Melanesian culture is a good corrective for the art historian, for each island or district has an art-form independent and fundamentally different from the other. All the material is in Australia, and has not been properly studied, or even exhibited[...] I was there at not a time to learn anything, except how ignorant we are.

- 5 Clark's letter to Berenson (more than in the anodyne account of his travels in Australia found in the second volume of his autobiography) succinctly describes the value of aboriginal art, couched in terms of British modernism, accentuated against Australian indifference. His observation that aboriginal bark paintings "do not represent a total impression of moment, but an analytic," accurately characterizes the X-ray style of Western Arnhem Land bark painting. Until the 1970s precedence always given to the European collection in the representation of art in Australian museums, even Australian Settler art was relegated to the back rooms of the National Gallery of Victoria. Clark's brief appointment as Felton Advisor resulted in some wonderful acquisitions, exemplified by two French paintings, an extraordinary Poussin, *The Crossing of the Red Sea*, acquired from a British collection, that of Lord Radnor, and Pierre Bonnard's *Siesta*, a painting that had hung in Clark's own collection at Saltwood Castle, Kent.
- 6 That Clark was introduced to indigenous art at all was the result of his friends, his protégé, Joseph Burke, recently arrived in Australia, Charles Mountford, an amateur anthropologist, and Daryl Lindsay, director of the National Gallery of Victoria, one of the first Australians to exhibit aboriginal art in the context of a national gallery. From 1909 to 1914 Lindsay led the enchanted life of a jackeroo, beginning at the age of nineteen at a remote cattle station, Yeranbah, near Angledoon, on the Narran River in Southern Queensland, where he was in direct contact with aboriginal culture. In these years he worked at various stations in Queensland, the Northern Territory, and Northern New South Wales, and in later years remembered this period in his life as an exceptionally happy one. The archaeological record for the Murray Darling Basin has many significant rock sites, now dated to 20,000 years old. Alone among directors of the National Gallery of Victoria—until very recent years—he encouraged exhibitions of indigenous art. After Lindsay retired from the National Gallery he returned to the Northern Territory and South Australia to visit significant sacred sites and wrote nostalgically about his prewar experiences on the land. Lindsay's understanding of

aboriginal art was developed by his friendship with Baldwin Spencer, an active trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria.

- 7 So impressed was Clark by the X-ray style of aboriginal work (fig. 2) that he attempted to arrange an exhibition of barks at the British Museum, London. Clark was particularly attracted to the 962 bark paintings collected by Baldwin Spencer from 1912 to 1921. Baldwin Spencer is known to have commissioned them as copies of rock paintings from the Oenpelli region, creating a particular relationship between ancient Australian rock art and their visual reception as bark imagery. Clark was offered Mountford's collection for display, but rejected them in favor of Baldwin Spencer's barks from Kakadu. "I think it would be a great mistake," Clark wrote, "to introduce aboriginal art in this country except in the best examples. I am sure the right thing to do is for the Melbourne Gallery to arrange a loan to the British Museum. There cannot be any objection to lending the British Museum things which are not exhibited in Melbourne, and which are not even accessible to students."
- 8 The exhibition or loan never took place. Melbournian disinterest in aboriginal culture was ruffled by the arrival of the German refugee Leonhard Adam (fig. 3), a Jewish intellectual, who had been transported to Australia on the infamous SS *Duneera* in 1942. The boat is legendary within the history of the Diaspora for the Jewish intellectuals were exceptionally distinguished and the British soldiers exceptionally brutal. To mention just a few names among the 2,000 passengers: Ernst Kitzinger (later professor of medieval art history at Harvard); Franz Phillip, one of the last pupils of Julius von Schollosser, who taught Renaissance art history at the University of Melbourne from 1950 to 1969; the photographer Helmut Newton; Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack of Bauhaus fame; and Adam.
- 9 Adam's first degree was a doctor of laws from Greifswald in 1916. His initial fascination with primitive law widened into a broad study of cultural anthropology, archaeology, and primitive art inspired by Franz Boas, with whom he had a long correspondence beginning in 1912. From 1930 to 1933 Adam held a chair at the University of Berlin in ethnological jurisprudence. In 1934 he fled to England, where as a refugee he wrote a bestseller, the classic Penguin *Primitive Art*, published in 1940, and reissued in successive editions in many languages, even after his death in 1960. The volume was ambitious, even unprecedented in its comparative global approach to primitivism, and owed a great deal to the collections of the British Museum, which he used more than any other source for the illustrations. From a scholarly perspective the book contained little original fieldwork, but was brilliantly written, an intelligent summary of other people's research. Adam adopted what might be called the cocktail approach to art history. Just as in cocktails when two strong liquors are mixed together for strong effect, Adam placed on adjoining pages, two disparate images. In an opening from the pages on "Utilitarian Art," Adam compared Chinese pictographs from H. E. Gibson's research with painted drawings on bark of a kangaroo hunt from Kakadu, reproduced after Baldwin Spencer's *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory*. His little book became the standard modernist account of the aesthetics of primitive art, the modernist ideology of primitivism.
- 10 Indigenous Australian art, which when the book was first published, he had as yet to encounter, occupied some fifteen pages. He describes ancient rock engravings, then dated to about 10,000 BC, as well as Baldwin Spencer's bark paintings. Adam's research was based on the fieldwork of Carl Strehlow and Charles Mountford. Until then Adam's

only fieldwork was conducted in unusual circumstances. It was on Gurkha marriage customs. From April to November 1918, he interviewed Indian prisoners of war at Morile-Marculesti in Southern Romania, soldiers taken prisoner on the Western front, who were billeted to Romania because they were unable to cope with the cold of a German winter. Adam realized the limitations of fieldwork conducted in such circumstances: “It is true,” he wrote, “that conversations with single individuals in a foreign country are but a surrogate.”

- 11 In 1942 Adam arrived in Australia, to be interned at Tatura, from where he was almost immediately released at the insistence of Professor Max Crawford, who held the chair in history at the University of Melbourne. By 1943 he was already publishing on Aboriginal art, beginning with the article “Does Aboriginal Art have a future.” It appeared in an art journal of radical chic, *Angry Penguins*, which had espoused the cause of modernism in Australia. One young artist, Sidney Nolan, who was involved in the publication of the journal, was converted to a love of primitivism in these years. In that year Nolan’s work changed from surrealist abstraction to a primitive style of landscape painting. In that year Nolan stated that his wish was only to create a new landscape, one that was uniquely Australian, and which was ignorant of all European conventions. Nolan’s Wimmera landscapes from the early 1940s show this change, which foreshadows his early Kelly paintings.
- 12 In 1943 Adam was invited by Daryl Lindsay to curate an exhibition of “Primitive Art” at the National Gallery of Victoria. Adam decided upon the ambitious idea of an exhibition of primitive art on a universal scale, including objects from Oceania, America and Africa, which he located in public and private collections in Melbourne. In his introduction to the catalogue he claimed, ‘There has never been a universal primitive art exhibition[...] the present one is the first of its kind not only in Australia but even in the world.’ According to Adam the primitive art exhibitions in the 1930s held in Berlin, New York, Paris, and London, were confined to African art, with the exception of a show of ancient American art, at Berlin in 1930.
- 13 “The arrangement of exhibits should not follow a geographical order,” he wrote to Lindsay, “but be made according to formal similarities, or materials. Social or religious functions may be briefly referred to in the labels as in a catalogue, but should not dominate the exhibition. There are incidentally, cases where a religious significance fulfils some aesthetic function! The principal should be aesthetic, and by no means ethnological.” For the catalogue cover Adam chose an African statue, a female figure from the Congo that he had discovered in the Museum of Australia, Sydney. Indigenous Australian material included bark paintings, shields, tjuringas, and Adam’s most recent discovery, indigenous drawings of the nineteenth century.
- 14 In his *Angry Penguins* article, Adam expressed his delight at the drawings on made by nineteenth century indigenous artists, especially Tommy McRae (c.1835–1901), using European materials. He considered they were evidence of how indigenous artists were responsive to a new environment. Squatters who wished to commission drawings from McRae would buy a book from the local stationary shop at Corowa where he lived, and the artist would fill it with drawings, often of corroborees, hunts, and affectionate depictions of Europeans.
- 15 McRae’s drawings have been kept for generations, such as these from the Foord family of Rutherglen. Inscriptions beneath the drawings are believed to be by the collectors.

These fragile books have been kept by families for generations and are only now beginning to enter public museums.

- 16 In searching for an image to announce the call for papers for the thirty-second international conference in art history, on the theme of *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence*, I chose a drawing by McRae, that represents crossing cultures. The *Corroboree or William Buckley and Dancers from the Wathourong People* (figs. 4–5), c. 1890, from the University of Melbourne Archives, belongs to the imagery of first contact. A truly witty drawing, McRae represents the Irish larrikin convict William Buckley, a six-foot-tall redhead, living and dancing comfortably among indigenous peoples in Victoria in the early years of the colony, the boat that brought him, the *Calcutta*, seen in the distance. The account of Buckley’s thirty-two years with the aboriginal people, established his reputation, in his own words as a “wild white man.” In a number of drawings, McRae represents Buckley as a figure of convergence, the first white man to learn indigenous languages, whereas most European artists depicted Buckley *after* he had emerged from his years with indigenous people.
- 17 From the time he was appointed to the University of Melbourne, Adam became curator of the anthropological collections and put together a collection of some 1,300 indigenous objects from all over the world. He often made exchanges with institutions abroad, giving aboriginal artifacts in exchange for objects of considerable quality from Venezuela, Canada (fig. 7), Mexico, and elsewhere. The collection is of extraordinary quality, unstudied and rarely seen. In 1946 Adam bought for the university from Fred Gray of Umbakumba a group of some forty-seven bark paintings made on Groote Eylandt (fig. 6). The paintings, if I may introduce a connoisseurial note, are of extraordinary beauty and significance. Unique among barks they have dark black and yellow grounds; sometimes various attempts to use different grounds are evident. The barks collected from Kakadu by Spencer are on plain bark or on a ground of red ocher. They have been the subject of several exhibitions, most recently in an exhibition curated by Joanne Bosse, *Creation Tracks and Trade Wings*, in which she consulted with the Groote Eylandt community and identified eleven artists, the majority of whom were born around 1900, and were the first in their clans to interact with Europeans.
- 18 Fred Gray was an Englishman who had many careers, farmer, pearl fisherman, bodyguard, who arrived at Groote Eylandt in the 1930s. Gray’s interest in aboriginal art was purely commercial. He saw it as a means of making money for other enterprises on the island; the barks were traded for tobacco and clothing. Gray made notes for Adam, where he stated that “only trade with bark pictures is with the white man.[...] I have never at any time during my stay among the aboriginals had a painting done on bark as a picture brought to me unless I have previously asked for them.[...] Natives will produce and sell on request to Europeans.”
- 19 The imagery of the Groote Eylandt barks relates to ancient rock art, which in the main depicts first contact imagery with two main non-indigenous groups, Dutch vessels from 1623, and Macassan fishermen who visited the island from southern Sulawesi in the mid-seventeenth century. The critical reception of Australian rock art begins with the watercolor drawings by William Westall of 1803 of Chasm Island, from the National Library of Australia, Canberra. Westall was a geologist and artist on the boat of Matthew Flinders, which surveyed this archipelago in these years.
- 20 A complex factor in the interpretation of twentieth-century indigenous objects is that they are the latest manifestation of what is claimed to be the oldest living art tradition

in the world. New rock painting is now a rarity, but the imagery of ancient rock art informs contemporary art and its stylistic conventions. In the 1950s Adam was engaged in writing a book, “The Arts of Primitive Peoples” from all over the world, a volume of the Pelican History of Art, edited by Nicolaus Pevsner, the drafts for which still survive and show his attempts to integrate Australian aboriginal art into a wider context. As usual, following in Baldwin Spencer’s footsteps he undertook fieldwork in 1955 to Quiurnpa—the locality of the plum-tree totem, some eighteen miles from Alice Springs (fig. 3). Like many other scholars Adam moved from barks to rock painting. Adam also amassed a large collection of over a thousand objects from indigenous cultures all over the world, often acquired by exchange (fig. 7), an illustration of his theories of comparative indigeneity.

- 21 In the year of Kenneth Clark’s visit to Australia, Mountford had published a book, *Brown Men and Red Sand: Wanderings in Wild Australia*. Chapter 10, “We Climb the Rock,” contained a lengthy account of his journey by camel to Uluru and the meaning of the cave paintings found there. Mountford took photographs of his aboriginal helper Moanya making a painting in red ochre on the wall of the cave. It has the look of a classical composition. In his text Mountford comments: “Surely what we saw that afternoon was unique; there a naked, brown-skinned man painted a primitive symbol, which was comparable in both design and technique with those produced by our forefathers of the Old Stone Age in Europe, twenty thousand years ago. It seemed as if the hands of time had been turned back through all those many centuries.” Moanya’s role as an ancient rock artist was challenged later that day, when another man and some children reported seeing drops of blood in the cave, a sign of the *kadaicha* man, interpreted by the Anangu people at Uluru, and that a sacred site had been disturbed. In the 1950s, when ancient Australian rock art began to be reliably dated, it became clear that some of these images were among the oldest known to mankind, as old as French counterparts at Lascaux or Chauvet. Australian rock art is a subject in its infancy, and new sites of extraordinary significance are found frequently.
- 22 The critical reception of indigenous art in Melbourne shows how anthropologists dominated the interpretative scene as it were, creating all the significant collections. The archaeologists were involved in nuts-and-bolts questions, like dating, and were rather anodyne in their writing, which had a lack of critical speculation. Australia is a continent that yields its secrets slowly. In its own quiet insistent way we are forced to reconsider the foundations of our separate disciplines. What kinds of objects cannot or can be viewed as art objects? What objects are resistant to the conventional art historical paradigms? Is anything totally secular in the history of aboriginal art? Is there something distasteful about the way we study sacred indigenous art—in lecture halls?
- 23 Towards the end of his life in Melbourne, Adam wrote to Alan McCulloch, art critic of the *Herald* newspaper about his dream to create two new museums in Melbourne, a dream that was never realized.

Primitive Art is the only original contribution which the native races of Oceania and Australia can make to human civilisation in their own right, whereas in all other activities they can at their best, only adapt themselves to European culture and copy the works of the whites.[...] Melbourne possesses an excellent large collection of primitive art of Melanesia. Yet apart from very few pieces now on exhibition, those valuable collections, including pieces of large dimensions, have been stored away in the vaults for years.[...] As in London the Museum of Natural

History and the Ethnographical and Archaeological Museum ought to be in separate institutions in separate buildings. It would be preferable to have two museums, one of Natural History and the other of Ethnography, or Anthropology, including preferably human palaeontology, thus being a counterpart to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.[...] It will then no longer happen that the precious bark paintings collected by Baldwin Spencer and others are packed away all the time in the dark vaults of the building.

- 24 Leonhard Adam and his generation laid the basis for later scholarship on the longest living artistic tradition in human history from rock art to bark paintings. The collections he created were as important as his writing.

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## RÉSUMÉS

My paper will explore three personalities, Kenneth Clark, Charles Mountford and Leonard Adam, and the impact they had on the creation and exhibition of collections of indigenous objects in Australia. Kenneth Clark visited Australia briefly in 1948 and left a dynamic legacy in both Melbourne and Adelaide. During his visit Clark was introduced to aboriginal art by Daryl Lindsay, director of the National Gallery of Victoria, one of the first Australians to show a passion for such things, by his friend Sir Joseph Burke, the first professor of art history at the University of Melbourne, and Charles Mountford, an amateur anthropologist and archaeologist. The most



considerable contribution to the study of aboriginal art was made by Leonhard Adam, a German Jewish intellectual, who in his classic book: *Primitive Art*, espoused the Modernist Ideology of Primitivism. He arrived in Australia in 1942, and created an extraordinary collection for the University of Melbourne, of aboriginal works and what might be described as 'global' primitivism.

## AUTEUR

### JAYNIE ANDERSON

The University of Melbourne –In 1997 Jaynie Anderson was appointed Herald Chair of Fine Arts, at The University of Melbourne. She is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and is Convenor of the 32nd international conference in the history of art *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence*, 13-18 January 2008. From 2008 to 2012 she will be President of CIHA (Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art). Among her most successful books are: *Giorgione. The Painter of Poetic Brevity*, 1997; *Tiepolo's Cleopatra*, 2003. She was one of the curators of: *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting*, an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the *Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*, 2006/2007.