

## MIEGUNYAH STUDENT PROJECT AWARD 2023

### Representation of Aboriginal architecture in the Grimwade collection

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*I'd like to acknowledge the unceded land  
of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people,  
and pay my respects to their Elders  
past, present and emerging. This was,  
is and always will be Aboriginal land.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Grimwade Collection includes several artworks that capture Aboriginal architecture as it was around the time of early occupation. These unique and compelling structures, like so much of Aboriginal knowledge and beliefs, has finally been recognised and celebrated in Paul Memmott's book, *Gunyah, Goondie + Wurley: the Aboriginal Architecture of Australia*. It defines Aboriginal Architecture as, "one that was created and built by the users, adjusted as required to suit their own lifestyle and changing needs, and supportive of their own social organisation and interaction - all done with their own technologies, labour and skills, and drawing where appropriate on their customary traditions."<sup>1</sup>

Paul Memmott is the primary voice in the field of Aboriginal architecture. His work is the main reference book for this topic, and I drew heavily from it in my research.

### GRIMWADE COLLECTION

Representation in paintings from the period of early settlement, according to Memmott, was critical in obtaining a visual understanding of Aboriginal architecture, particularly "where the colonial impact was early and enduring to the extent that acute cultural change resulted in the cessation of the classical ethno-architectural practice."<sup>2</sup>

There are only four artworks within the Grimwade collection that are known to contain representations of Aboriginal architecture. The first is 'Merry Creek, Plenty Ranges', by

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Memmott, *Gunyah, Goondie + Wurley: the Aboriginal Architecture of Australia*, Thames & Hudson: Port Melbourne, 2022, first published 2007 by University of Queensland Press, 2

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 341

an unknown artist from 1864, and collected in the book, *The Melbourne Album: containing a series of views of Melbourne and surrounding districts*. It shows a tent-like structure covered in dense branches to provide warmth; but also of keen interest, it shows the manipulation of the waterways through the construction of a weir to facilitate the capture of fish and eels.

The second artwork is also in a collection of prints published in a book about agriculture and grazing in NSW. The print is entitled, 'Party preparing to bivouac' from 1826 - also by an unknown artist. Ignoring the trope of the master-servant relationship depicted in the middle of the frame, this is interesting for the process of construction illustrated with the sheets of bark being stripped from the nearby trees and laid over the frame to provide shelter.

The third artwork is one of two panoramas in the collection that were included in the final exhibition and presentation. Entitled 'Panoramic view of Port Jackson, New South Wales' it was created by James Taylor (draughtsman) and Robert Havell & Son (engraver) from 1823. The Eora people from the Port Jackson area built tent-like dwellings, similar to the previous two examples, made of branches and bark. The artist James Taylor was a Military officer, who arrived in Sydney in 1817 with the 48th Foot Regiment aboard the *Matilda*. Taylor produced several paintings and prints throughout his tours and his panoramic works of Sydney were particularly popular when exhibited back home in England, according to the Artists of Australia directory website.

The final image is entitled 'Panoramic view of King George's Sound, part of the colony of Swan River' from 1834. Artist Robert Dale was a government surveyor, explorer and administrator in Western Australia from 1829 to 1833, and he made a number of watercolour views of the Swan River Colony during this time (according to the Artists of Australia directory website). This panorama shows the Noongar people of south-west WA and their dome-shaped structures. According to Paul Memmott's research, the saplings were flexible enough to be bent into semi-circles and embedded in the ground with cross-bracing woven between to provide rigidity, and then clad in paperbark or grass trees. "This [type of] shelter not only provided shade but also facilitated outward vision and allowed breezes through, while filtering out flies."<sup>3</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Aboriginal architecture was created on an *ad hoc* basis; that is, in response to a specific need or purpose<sup>4</sup>. It was built *by* people *for* people. Fit for purpose, between its form and its function. "The first houses sheltered their inhabitants from the external environment

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 10

<sup>4</sup> Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism*, Seeker and Warburg: London, 1972, 15

and furnished a climate that man [sic] could begin to control.”<sup>5</sup> This was the beginning of architecture: the separation of *inside* from *outside*, *climate* from *microclimate*; and at the same time, the *included* from the *excluded*.

Indigenous people used the materials to hand for the conditions they lived in. That is, different conditions and materials required different solutions. And that may have changed depending on the season, or the location, or the requirement for kinship relations, or food preparation - or any number of other reasons.

Vernacular tradition made “an optimum use of the climate in each place.”<sup>6</sup> Nowadays, “we move further and further away from the elements, especially in cities.”<sup>7</sup> There was a time when we were connected to the *environment*, rather than the internet. There was a time we were *in* it, not rushing *through* it.

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<sup>5</sup> Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, translated by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Okman, MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass, 1982

<sup>6</sup> Go Hasegawa, in Cecilia, Fernando Marquez and Richard Levene, eds, “Go Hasegawa 2005-2017”, *El Croquis* 191, 2017, 243

<sup>7</sup> Martin Fröhlich, “Hut on Fichtelberg Mountain,” *a+u*, 499, April 2012, 20