



FOREWORD

Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection offers remarkable insights into Yolngu art. Donald Thomson's research was innovative for its time and the resulting collection remains dynamic and inspiring. The collection offers a record of Arnhem Land art and culture that is engaged and holistic: it fosters an understanding of the complex networks of place, history, art and experience. Research by Lindy Allen, senior curator, anthropology (Northern Australia), Museum Victoria, has followed Donald Thomson's lead; artists, artworks, symbols and historical experience are all brought to life with vigour, energy and power.

Donald Thomson's detailed exploration of Yolgnu artworks is all the more exciting because it offers such a close experience of their creation. Regardless of cultural origin, artworks often come to us detached from their original context. The passage of time disconnects us from essential data, and from artists and traditions that are the foundation of art's meanings. To learn simple information, such as the date of an artwork, can be an important discovery. The Donald Thomson Collection goes far beyond this. We learn of the day on which an artwork was made. The location, the materials and the tools are documented. The voice of the artist carries, strong and loud, across time. Symbols and meanings are shared in detail. Through a long engagement with the Donald Thomson Collection, field research, community consultation and her own acute analysis, Lindy Allen has established new points of entry to this complex collection.

This exhibition is the product of a long and fruitful collaboration between the University of Melbourne and Museum Victoria. The custody and management of the Donald Thomson Collection is a joint task undertaken by a committee representing both institutions. The staff of Museum Victoria has brought both skill and commitment to the care and conservation of the collection. Museum Victoria is acutely conscious of the importance of the collection and has added to its significance through engaging in extensive research, including talking with people from Aboriginal communities that Donald Thomson visited. The collection continues to evolve, generating new knowledge and contributing to Indigenous cultural strength. This exhibition seeks a new approach to the collection, reflecting on the aesthetic qualities of many key artworks. We are especially grateful to Lindy Allen and her colleagues at both museums for the enthusiasm with which they have engaged in dialogue to create an outstanding exhibition.

Dr Chris McAuliffe
Director
The Ian Potter Museum of Art

Dr Patrick Greene OBE
Chief Executive Officer
Museum Victoria

COVER

Wonggu Mununggurr (with sons, Maama, Mawunpuy and Natjiyalma) cat. no. 22

BACK COVER

Attributed to Mawunpuy Mununggurr cat. no. 25

Ancestral power and the aesthetic is the first exhibition to give focus to the extraordinary painted works collected from Arnhem Land during the mid-1930s and early 1940s 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 ceremonial designs in the Donald Thomson Collection cannot be underestimated. For all its richness, the collection has not attracted the attention it duly deserves, and this exhibition provides the first opportunity to bring together painted works drawing upon the field-work of Donald Thomson¹ and the expertise of Yolngu past and present together with my own curatorial research.²

MINYTJI

The distinctive patterns on the bark paintings and men's objects in the exhibition are sacred ceremonial designs called *minyitji*³ and Donald Thomson's field writings reveal the depth of his investigation into the complexities associated with this notion and the tenets that underpin a unique artistic practice. He wrote extensively about the intrinsic importance of *minyitji* and noted that it represented the totemic clan ancestors, *likan wangarr*. Further, he wrote that *minyitji* was the embodiment of the ancestor—the *wangarr*—in that the patterns mirror the actual design painted on the body of the ancestor in ancestral times. 'The natives [sic] say that when the *wangarr* [was half-ancestor], half *yulngo* [human], he swam or submerged with his body painted and that he [had] this *minyitji*.'

A rare depiction of this is seen in the large central figure in cat. no. 25, where one of the Djan'kawu Sister ancestors is shown in half-*wangarr*/half-Yolngu form painted with *minyitji*. Little of Donald Thomson's documentation about this work survives, but my own research shows that her footprints in the top right of the painting indicate she is traveling and that the *minyitji* surrounding the figure is the reflection onto the ground of the *likan minyitji* painted on her body as she walks along in the sun.⁴

Thomson's field-notes detail the way in which *minyitji* is painted. He writes about who can paint and under what circumstances; for example, when a person died, the body was painted with their *mardayin minyitji*, i.e. the sacred designs of the person's own clan—'he takim *minyitji* from that *likan wangarr*'.⁵ Painting the bodies of men with *mardayin minyitji* was done for ceremony, most notably the higher order men's ceremonies and circumcision. Thomson learned that the same old man who revealed the *rangga* (sacred object) to young male initiates would paint their chests with their sacred clan designs.

A number of paintings exhibit a strong reference to *minyitji* as ceremonial body design. In 1937 Donald Thomson photographed men at Milingimbi on the final day of a Ngarra ceremony when the body paintings are revealed to others. These same designs appear to have been painted for Donald Thomson onto single sheets of bark, one being *Ngarra minyitji* (cat. no. 6) representing bandicoot tracks associated with the Gupapuyngu Birrkili clan; and another the Mildjingi clan designs related to the ancestral Dog (cat. no. 9).

Another suite of body painting works were completed for Donald Thomson at Gaartji in central Arnhem Land in 1937 and many typically exhibit the body form and the way in which *minyitji* is painted onto a man's chest, up over his shoulders and downwards onto his upper thighs. This suite of ceremonial body design paintings includes the work *Djirr'miny dhaawa* (cat. no. 7).

MARR

Donald Thomson would learn that the fine quality or aesthetic sought and achieved in painting *minyitji* was not incidental, and that it was driven by the desire to capture the essence of the *wangarr* and harness its strength and power or *marr*. In field-notes from August 1937, Thomson explores in detail the concept of an aesthetic and the way in which the power of the ancestor is evoked by a sensory experience, a 'flash', when exposed to *minyitji*:

The spirit of the whole *minyitji*—it is likened to the flash of a sudden 'uplift' when [the men] see the *marr* of the secret *minyitji* ... likened also to anger ... the sensation of eyes is—its *wangarr* itself—they mean the sensation of light ... the whole sensation of light expressed to me as 'light colour' ... the penetrating flash, the fixed intent stare of the eye—a wonderful mystical concept—idea—here ... All *minyitji*—[Dhuwa] and Yirritja, has this light.⁶

Thomson noted that the word for this 'light' was *bir'yun*, a term that has a gloss in Yolngu language, meaning to sparkle, glitter or shine. In this context, *minyitji bir'yun* represents the happiness or playfulness found in 'fresh water and flowers', i.e. the sparkling sensation of flowering white gums reflected in water.

The term *bir'yun* arose again for Thomson in discussions of the Djan'kawu Sisters, represented in a number of works in the exhibition. In this context *bir'yun* was applied to describe the sun and Donald Thomson was told that it was used only for bright light or 'scintillation of the sun and of *likan minyitji*'. His informants then pointed to a painted ceremonial basket hanging nearby and described the meaning of the design relating to the tail of the sacred goanna, Djan'ka or Djarrka, which emerged from sacred waterholes formed where the Djan'kawu Sisters plunged their *wapitja* or digging-sticks into the ground.

Thomson also recorded that, by contrast, the meaning and quality of *bir'yun* was 'conceived of as the light or hypnotic stare of angry eyes [which] they demonstrated to me'. His notes describe the light as a flash or 'the "sensation of light" that one gets and carries away in one's mind's eye, from a glance at a *likan minyitji*'. This describes *marr* or ancestral power embodied in *minyitji* at its most dangerous and by association objects decorated with these ancestral designs similarly hold *wangarr likan marr*. Donald Thomson was told it was like the spirit of the *miringu* (literally 'bad', 'no good') *marr*, and the example given was the anger of the ancestral shark when speared by Murayana, an important *wangarr* for the Gupapuyngu Daygurrugur clan.

DONALD THOMSON'S INSIGHTS

The complexities of the concept of *marr* are well beyond the scope of this exhibition. Donald Thomson himself noted his own limitations in this regard. He writes that the unnamed informant was 'cold and at the end of his patience' and so 'had to write this down in haste'; while at the same time Thomson thought that more time or discussion would not have provided him with greater insight.

Donald Thomson's investigations of Yolngu understandings and the complexities associated with the meanings of designs remained dispersed throughout his field-notes. It was never the focus of in-depth study despite his own conviction as to the principle importance of the bark paintings over all other things he collected. Donald Thomson's field-notes include diagrammatic interpretations of many of the bark paintings in which annotations and descriptions of key elements of the *minyitji* reinforce their association with *wangarr*. This was similarly done for key ceremonial objects that, given their sacred and sensitive nature, cannot be discussed here.

Donald Thomson's own insights include the way in which perspective is used by Yolngu. As his knowledge builds over time he explores the way in which specific clans represent and use *minyitji* distinctively or in relation to each other; for example, the Mildjingi clan designs on the sacred men's basket (cat. no. 12) represent the clouds that bring the seasonal monsoonal rains. This *minyitji* appears on a number of Mildjingi clan paintings here (see, for example, cat. no. 11). This is in stark contrast with the *minyitji* of the Djapu clan of eastern Arnhem Land, in which these same clouds are characterized by lines within squares as seen in cat. no. 22. However differently the *minyitji* is rendered or whether the *likan minyitji* is done on the body of a man for ceremony or on his ceremonial basket, or elsewhere such as on a bark painting, the essence remains the same, and adherence to appropriate cultural practices is controlled by those with appropriate knowledge and status.

CONCLUSIONS

Yolngu artistic practice is founded upon the principle of capturing the essence of the spirit of the *wangarr likan marr* through a fine and unique aesthetic practice. The quality of the work in this exhibition clearly demonstrates this, giving wonderful examples of the distinctive Yolngu technique of painting *minyitji* that so engaged Donald Thomson. The bark paintings and the ceremonial men's objects emerge from a period during which all that was publicly known of the region was the arrest of Yolngu men for killing Japanese fishermen at Caledon Bay, the investigation of which was the catalyst for Donald Thomson's journey to Arnhem Land in 1935.

These works are drawn from over 4500 objects collected by Donald Thomson between 1935 and 1937 and again in 1942 and 1943. About a third of the bark paintings in the Donald Thomson Collection are shown in this exhibition. The collection also has a large body of highly decorated and painted ceremonial objects from Arnhem Land, many of which have cultural and gender restrictions associated with them. The Arnhem Land holdings overall have been the subject of discussions with the relevant Yolngu variously over the past twenty years, with visitors coming to the museum to see the objects as well as field-based research that has seen objects taken to Arnhem Land. Most of the bark paintings in this exhibition have never been exhibited or published.

The works displayed here have been chosen based on their thematic or cultural content together with clan and moiety affiliations in order to provide a representative sample of the broad range of works in the Donald Thomson Collection. Many works represent the earliest known depictions of the travels of the major *wangarr* or creation ancestors and, while there is little information about how Donald Thomson came to have these painted, they provide clear statements about Yolngu ownership and responsibilities for clan estates.⁷

ENDNOTES

1. In the mid-1930s when Donald Thomson did his research and collecting in Arnhem Land, the work of Aboriginal artists was considered 'primitive art' in both academe and the public arena. A framework for considering the work of Aboriginal artists as art, albeit 'primitive', emerged with the work of WB Spencer, who collected the first bark paintings from western Arnhem Land in 1912. These were exhibited at the (then) National Museum of Victoria in 1915.
2. I took images and documentation relating to the bark paintings in the Donald Thomson Collection to Arnhem Land in 1994 and have worked over subsequent years to discuss details and gain further insight into the works. Significant research was undertaken as Partner Investigator on the ARC Linkage Project (LP 0347221), Anthropological and Aboriginal Perspectives on the Donald Thomson Collection: Material Culture, Collecting and Identity, a collaboration between Museum Victoria and the Australian National University (2002–06).
3. *Minyitji* is also spelt *miny'tji* and *mintji* (the latter was used by Donald Thomson).
4. Minyipa Mununggurr, interview with the author at Buku-Larrnggay Arts Centre, Yirrkala, 2002.
5. *Minyitji* of a person's *mari's* (maternal grandmother's) clan could be painted onto the body. However that of other clans was only done, for example, when a person died away from their own country and 'people do not know or have no right to use his own [the deceased's] *mintji*'. Donald Thomson's field-notes, on loan to Museum Victoria from the Thomson family (Donald Thomson Manuscript, p. 117).
6. Donald Thomson Manuscript, p. 81.
7. Particularly important in relation to this are the works *Dhukurra dhaawa* (cat. no. 5) and *Djapu minyitji* (cat. no. 22); and the suite of works (cat. nos 22–26) produced by members of the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit at the base camp at Garrthalala in September 1942.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Lindy Allen
Exhibition curator



Attributed to Makani Wilingarr cat. no. 11



Attributed to Makani Wilingarr cat. no. 9

Documentation on the Donald Thomson Collection is incomplete in parts. Where necessary, artists' details or artwork titles 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.

Dimensions are given as height before width before depth.

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 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
Djambarrpuynu 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 Djambarrpuynu 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 designs) 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 and 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' *minyitji*
(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
Wuluwurr 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
Wuluwurr 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 Natjijalma)
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:
Djarrka (Sacred Goanna) 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 Goanna) and *Daarka*
(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
Djimbarayun 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
Djimbarayun Ngurruwuthun
born c. 1900, died c. 1960
Munyuku clan, Yirritja moiety
Dhulwung (Sacred Fern) story design
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, DT5837

33
Ratjpa (red ochre) wrapped in bark
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



Artist unknown cat. no. 6



Artist unknown cat. no. 5



FURTHER READING

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ANCESTRAL POWER AND THE AESTHETIC: ARNHEM LAND PAINTINGS AND OBJECTS FROM THE DONALD THOMSON COLLECTION

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