

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 *minyitji*, and the tenets that underpin a uniquely Yolngu artistic practice. Thomson would learn of the intrinsic importance of *minyitji* as the embodiment of totemic clan ancestors called *wangarr*. The fine aesthetic quality sought and achieved in Yolngu painting—a 'shine' or 'brilliance' called *bir'yun*—was intended to capture the essence of the *wangarr* and harness its strength and power or *marr*.

The works in the exhibition illustrate the diversity of *mardayin minyitji* 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

Central Arnhem Land

Donald Thomson travelled to Arnhem Land for the second time in July 1936 and by October that year had set up a base camp at Gaartji on the mainland in central Arnhem Land. Over the following year he collected thirty or more paintings that depict *mardayin minytji*, the sacred ancestral clan designs.

The first works made at Gaartji reflect the activity that typically occurs over the wet season when men are painted with *mardayin minytji* for ceremony, most notably the higher order men's ceremonies. At Milingimbi the previous year, Donald Thomson had photographed men on the last day of the important men's Ngarra ceremony when such designs are revealed publicly. For circumcision ceremonies, the chests of young boys being initiated are painted with *mardayin minytji* by the 'same old man' who reveals to them the *rangga* or sacred ceremonial objects.

The first works Donald Thomson collected at Gaartji in early 1937 include the four paintings displayed here, to the right. These relate to the ancestral Dog, Warung, which is important for the Mildjingi clan whose country centres on a sacred waterhole at a place called Garrinyal near the mouth of the Glyde River. The distinctive *minytji* associated with Warung includes the triangular motif that represents monsoonal clouds, *djarrapung*, which herald the arrival of the wet season. The vertical lines are the clouds standing up and the dots represent the rain falling.

Most of the works from central Arnhem Land displayed in this room are painted with the distinctive *likan wangarr minytji* or body designs belonging to ancestors of the major clans of the region. Donald Thomson also collected a very important narrative painting from Tjam Yilkari Kitani, a senior ceremonial leader for the Liyagalawumirr clan. Yilkari painted the story of the Wagilag Sisters and their activities at Miramina, a waterhole sacred to the Liyagalawumirr clan.

Eastern Arnhem Land

A significant series of bark paintings emerged in 1942 when Donald Thomson returned to Arnhem Land as a RAAF squadron leader seconded to the army. He hand-picked a group of fifty Yolngu men from across Arnhem Land to form the nucleus of a fighting force known as the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU) to defend more than 1600 kilometres of Australia's northern coastline against Japanese attack. The NTSRU was overseen by the senior clan leaders with whom Donald Thomson had worked closely in the 1930s, including the important Djapu leader Wonggu Mununggurr. Wonggu had painted the first bark painting (displayed in the adjacent room) for Donald Thomson seven years earlier.

Yolngu from all the major clans across Arnhem Land were based at Garthalala in Caledon Bay. In September 1942, Wonggu with his sons Maama, Mawunpuy and Natjiyalma completed a single major work (displayed on the left) that references the *likan wangarr* or totemic ancestors for the Djapu, a Dhuwa clan. These ancestors are linked to country inland from Caledon Bay and provide the focus of important ceremonial activities. The distinctive motif in this painting is the important Djapu *minytji*—square and rectangular forms inset with lines—that represent *mangan*, the wet season clouds. These are represented stacked on top of one another on the horizon to mark the arrival of the monsoonal rains. In his field-notes Donald Thomson wrote how the *minytji* associated with these clouds was markedly different in form to the diamond motif used by Yirritja clans.

A dozen or more paintings were completed over the next few days in September 1942 by Wonggu's sons and other NTSRU members. These artworks form a unique suite that captures the *mardayin minytji* or sacred ancestral clan designs of the inland and saltwater estates associated with all Yirritja and Dhuwa clans of Blue Mud Bay. The *wangarr* Djan'kawu Sisters, important for Dhuwa clans across Arnhem Land, feature prominently in many of these paintings.

Arafura Sea

Cape Stewart

Elcho Island

● Milingimbi

Yathalamara ●

Gaartji

Woolen River

Arnhem Bay

Yirrkala ●

Liverpool River

Central Arnhem Land

Glyde River

Miramina ●

Arafura Swamp

Eastern Arnhem Land

Blyth River

Goyder River

Wonggu's camp ●

Caledon Bay

Koolatong River

Trial Bay

Matarawatj ●

Gulf of Carpentaria

● Ngilipidji

Woodah Island

Walker River

Blue Mud Bay

Groote Eylandt

Rose River

Wilton River

Roper Bar ●

Roper River

