

Designs on the Future: Aboriginal Painted Shields of Tropical North Queensland, Australia

by

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Introduction to the Project

The four authors of this paper are members of a multidisciplinary team working on a research project funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC Discovery Grant). The title of the project is: *Objects of Possession: Artefact Transactions in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland, 1870-2013*. The project is led by Rosita Henry and the Chief Investigators are all members of the School of Arts and Social Sciences at James Cook University. Research Associates on the project include a number of interested Aboriginal people from the study area, including George Skeene, Rhonda Duffin, Rhonda Brim and Roy Gibson.



Left to Right - Back: Bard Aaberge, George Skeene, Mike Wood, Ton Otto; Front: Rhonda Brim, Rhonda Duffin, Rosita Henry



Trish Barnard Trish Barnard, Senior Curator Cultures & Histories, Museum of Tropical Queensland



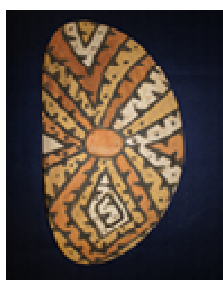
Rosita Henry at the Musee du Quai Branly; Photograph by Jessica De Larcy- Healy

Collection of Aboriginal artefacts from the Wet Tropics of Australia, such as the iconic painted shields and woven baskets, has a long history. This project examines relationships between artefact collectors, Aboriginal producers and their descendants, museums and the state.

We aim to provide the first systematic history of ethnographic collecting in the rainforest region of North Queensland. The research has two components:

1. Historical research

We are particularly interested in archival materials (diaries, letters and so on) and published materials that tell us about the transactions between the early European collectors and the Aboriginal producers of the artefacts they collected. We aim to trace how the objects took on different value/s as they changed hands from the producers to the collectors to the museums.



Bicornual basket and shield, JCU Material Culture Collection, photos by Rosita Henry

2. Ethnographic research

We are interested in exploring the significance of these museum objects for Aboriginal people today in terms of cultural heritage. This component of the research project includes an exploration of the way contemporary Aboriginal artists engage with museum artefacts in the production of their works.



Rhonda Brim weaving a basket at the Laura Aboriginal Dance and Cultural Festival,

2009; photographer: Rosita Henry

Abridged version of presentation at the TransOceanik Conference in La Reunion

Distinctive painted shields made by Aboriginal people of the NQ rainforest region, have historically been collected and placed in museums all over the world. Today, in Australia, there are numerous Aboriginal artists who have produced painted shields as fine art and/or who have referenced the designs on shields held in museums in their contemporary art works. Why has there been such an efflorescence of artistic works referencing the shield, this unique combination of both sculpture and painting?

The shields, made from the buttress roots of rainforest fig trees (*Ficus sp*), feature a distinctive central 'boss', which was referred to in the middle ages in French as *boucle* (today it means 'buckle') (Boyer 2000: 10). The designs on the front were painted in natural red and yellow ochre, white pipe clay and black charcoal. In most cases, motifs are outlined in black and/or black is used over other colours to create dots or cross-hatchings (Abernethy 1984: 73-74). Significant for our interpretive analysis in this paper is that the black pigment is said to have been produced by mixing charcoal with human blood (Johnson (2003: 156).

We consider a number of different approaches that might be taken to interpreting the meaning of the designs on the shields but question whether the anthropological study of art should confine itself to the study of its symbolism and meaning. According to Alfred Gell, an anthropological theory of art should go beyond the study of art simply as a communicative system. It should be the study of social relationships in a particular

domain, ‘a domain in which “objects” merge with “people” by virtue of the existence of social relations between persons and things, and persons and persons *via* things’ (1998:12). For Gell (1998: 6), ‘Art is a means of changing the world (rather than merely encoding symbolic propositions about it)’.

Our ethnographic research reveals that the rainforest shields and their designs have cosmological significance for rainforest Aboriginal people today, particularly contemporary artists. The shields are involved in complex relations of power and inequality (as expressed in the politics of native title) and they are embedded in contemporary social and political relations among Rainforest Aboriginal peoples themselves, pursuing their own cultural goals ‘within a matrix of local inequalities and power differentials’ (Ortner 2006: 144) . In this sense, the contemporary shield continues to be an ‘agentic object’, embedded in webs of relations. It is a mediatory thing, enabling a ‘capacity to act’, empowering Rainforest Aboriginal people (through visual art and performance) to respond to forces of domination and subordination.

Aboriginal artists who have reproduced shields as fine art include Paul Bong, who first began to paint shields over 20 years ago. He painted shields that his uncle had carved for him. These are hanging as an installation in the Brisbane airport. Similarly, Michael Boiyoong Anning has been making and painting shields for many years. More recently, Vernon Ah Kee has painted shield designs on surfboards that resonate with the shape or form of shields, Roy Gibson has created a series of fiberglass shields and Napoleon Oui references the rainforest shield in all of his paintings and prints.

For links to images of Vernon Ah Kee’s work see:

<https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3095/robert-macpherson-vernon-ah-kee-and-jeremy-hynes/>

<http://secapresearch.com.au/2010/10/cantchant-installation/>

For more information and images of Napoleon Oui’s work link to:

<http://www.napoleanoui.com/news.html>

Aboriginal artists today engage with museum objects to access the knowledge and skills of their ancestors. These artefacts are seen as being imbued not only with ancestral spirit but also with actual bodily substance, blood and sweat, of the old people who made them. In seeking to engage with these objects artists are not merely seeking knowledge and inspiration; they are seeking to substantiate and authenticate their connections to the 'old people', and to recompose and weave sometimes politically fraught new relationships of identity and difference, from the creative energy of the Dreaming accessible through the shields that their 'old people' made.



Contemporary shields by artist, Michael Anning, on permanent display in the Cairns Convention Centre; photo by Trish Barnard



Indigenous Choir performing at the Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair (CIAF) 2012; photo by Rosita Henry