**Ara Irititja: Adding More Value to Aboriginal Art Through Education**

A digital archive enables the Anangu to re-engage with their history, helping others to learn about them.

By Susan Kathleen Lowish  
(Lecturer, University of Melbourne, Australia)  
susan.lowish@unimelb.edu.au

The art of Aboriginal Australia is greatly varied, often dynamic and ultimately reflective of a huge number of distinctly different, vibrant and living cultures. Due to this great diversity, a common understanding of what is meant by “Aboriginal art” is increasingly difficult to reach.

Some people think instantly of the great acrylic canvases of the famous Amatyerre artist, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, or the small Masonite boards of the first generation of painters based at Papunya. Other people, from an earlier generation, might view the magisterial ochre on bark creations of Arnhem Land artists: Yirawala, Mawalan Marika or Nariaj Manmuru, as truly indicative of this art. While still others might visualize the acerbic wit of Destiny Deacon’s low-tech photographs and films, or Vernon Ah Kee’s gently sketched family portraits. All would be correct in thinking, “this is Aboriginal art.”

A simplified view

The problem with using this race-based term is that it ends up meaning “anything” and “everything” at the same time, obscuring difference and creating confusion. For example, in 2003, Murri artist Richard Bell won an award for a painting he called Aboriginal art, its a white thing. Through this piece, the artist was making some astute observations and political comments about the way in which Aboriginal art appeared to be dominated by white, rather than Aboriginal, people. In particular, auction houses and commercial galleries—the two main vehicles for making money from Aboriginal art—are mainly owned and operated by non-Aboriginal people. In this respect, it can be argued that the money culture of Aboriginal art is primarily non-Aboriginal.

However, the history of Aboriginal art in Australia contradicts this rather simplified view and shows that its many forms have developed out of dialogue and exchange. From the earliest days of European colonization, people would trade work for tobacco, tea or sugar. Whether or not these rates were equitable is another matter.

Most recently, research work has been done by Professor Jon Altman at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University and also by Professor María Langton, Inaugural Chair in Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne. Smaller, local histories of exchange and art can be found in some excellent catalogues produced by art galleries and art centres.

Refusing white culture and history

In speaking to Aboriginal artists from all across Australia, it becomes clear that “the money story,” as it is commonly called, is only part of the picture. It is through art that people can communicate some of their love, knowledge and belonging to particular places. They also communicate aspects of their law, history, attitudes and religious beliefs. In situations where people are fighting for the recognition of their title to land, or searching for a sustainable way to live on that country, the ability to connect to country through art becomes important. For many artists, Aboriginal art is about refusing the dominance of white culture and white history. In this sense, Aboriginal art is anything but a white thing.

Not only money

Disappointingly, it is the focus on the economic value of Aboriginal art that dominates. Media coverage concentrates mainly on the market, with recent auction records and fakes and forgery scandals the order of the day. Government policy and Senate reports similarly focus on the same, wanting to know how to “grow the sector.” There is nothing wrong with government assistance; it is often necessary in remote or newly established regions. However, this dominant ideology filters through to the public as a specific attitude: “Do you know where to buy cheap Aboriginal art?” is the number one question most people ask. The money story often translates as a desire to find a bargain.

A shift is needed

Changing this mentality is necessary if we wish to influence an art world rife with stories of unconscionable conduct. Ideological reform is a must if we want to go beyond the production-line that many Aboriginal artists now increasingly find themselves in. At present, the culture of Aboriginal art in Australia is one of consumer-driven greed. The price tag on Aboriginal art keeps going up, while the...
situation for Aboriginal artists, and Aboriginal people in general, gets worse. One solution might be to complement economy with education, with more people learning about Aboriginal art, learning about the distinct languages, histories and cultures from which it comes. This does not mean more studies of Aboriginal people; but it does mean more engagement with them and more direct involvement by Aboriginal people in the ways in which their culture is represented in the mainstream.

Compared with Maori culture

I recently had an opportunity to compare display strategies in small, cultural heritage museums in New Zealand and Australia or named in the use of terminology in the wall text and display panels, it was incredible to realize just how much greater is the general knowledge of Maori culture to New Zealand people, in general. No translation of Maori terms was offered. Clearly the comparison of Australia and New Zealand is flawed by the vast difference between the contact histories of the two nations. Similarly, it is difficult and often problematic to compare indigenous heritages. Nevertheless, the adoption of Maori language, Maori culture, Maori management of water, land and food resources by the mainstream is inspiring.

Ignorance of history

Aboriginal Australians are, by large, ignorant of the history of the indigenous cultures of the regions in which they live. To gain knowledge requires some effort. Many efforts are complicated due to the great diversity of Aboriginal cultures. The easy way out is to think that all Aboriginal people are the same—descendants of the "n nomads of the desert," a notion popularised throughout the 1950s and 1960s, refined and re-engage with their own social history.

Anangu culture

The computer program that forms the core of the project has been carefully developed in consultation with Anangu and reflects many of their linguistic, social and cultural conventions. For example, the program enables files to be sorted into Open Access, Sensitive and Sorrow – this last category indicating that persons seen, heard or named in the files are recently deceased. There are also divisions between men’s and women’s materials, sacred and secular, and so on. This has resulted in a living archive that is responsive to the needs and concerns of present-day Anangu, frequently used, much loved and admired.

Multiple copies of this program have been licensed by Ara Iritijtja to the Northern Territory Library (NTL) for installation in regional libraries. Renamed as “Our Stories” and minus the special worktool, this same software is helping Aboriginal people gain computer literacy and record their local history.

Rediscovering self-worth

Clearly there is scope to apply this program to the recording of history of Aboriginal art; Ara Iritijtja has already begun this history for Anangu. I believe that an open access version of the entire history of Aboriginal art could help curb the over-emphasis on the monetary value of Aboriginal art and contribute to the learning process.

Most importantly, the Ara Iritijtja project renews a disadvantaged population with a sense of their own self worth. Working collaboratively on a social history of Aboriginal art has twin potentials. First, it opens up part of an industry that is currently dominated by non-indigenous people. Second, it gives it a much-needed historical and contextual dimension. With more meaningful and valuable art records from Indigenous people, it will become more and more difficult to say, “Aboriginal Art, it’s a white thing.” Additionally, this historical context can provide the foundation for the much-requested critical reception of the genre. It has become increasingly evident that Aboriginal art criticism is impossible without a strong sense of history to ground it in.

While a focus on history is not a cure-all, it is certainly one way of improving the contemporary culture of Aboriginal art. Moving away from the money story toward a more equitable, educational context for one of the planet’s most vibrant, diverse and dynamic visual cultures will surely be an improvement.

References:

1. Richard Bol, Gamilaroi language, Brisbane: QMD, won the 2004 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in August 2003 with Scientific E Metaphysics (Be’s Theorem,), synthetic polymer paint on canvas. His winning entry contains the text “Aboriginal Art is a White Thing” and also known by this name.


5. For more information visit the website: www.iritijtja.com

6. Ara Iritijtja software contributed toward the NTL being awarded one million dollars from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The publicity status that the money will be spent on increased training and accessibility to the archive. One hopes that some of that prime money finds its way back to the Social History Unit of the Pintjantjatjara Council who have struggled many years with next to no funding to achieve the results that others capitalise on today.
