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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the pre-colonial aboriginal societies that in part established laws, customs, and history through art. The paper cites their artistic mediums and methods and explains that art among the aborigines was used for learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. The paper describes the role of art in pre-colonial aboriginal societies under the following headings: Learning, Doing, Observation, Patience, Transition, Totems, Simple Logic, Art, Rules, X-Ray, Drawings, Etchings, The Professionals, Innovation, and Stone Arrangements and Carvings. (BT)

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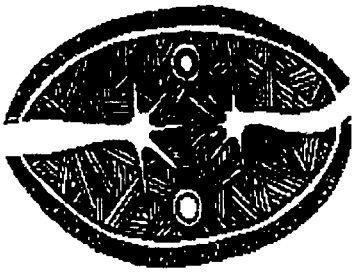

"Cultures and Transitions - Aboriginal Art Now and Then"

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by

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Sydney, Australia

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CULTURES AND TRANSITIONS

ABORIGINAL ART NOW AND THEN

Rosemary Barrowcliffe and Olga Miller

A most people would be aware the pre-colonial Aboriginal Societies did not use writing in any part of their culture. This was compensated in other ways; laws and custom were conveyed orally, as were history. These things were also recorded through art. Mediums and methods were unique to moities or geographic regions. The style of painting, whether lines, dots or cross-hatching were used, taught a different lesson.

Today the Aboriginal culture in most parts has undergone a transformation. The loss of contact with country and has also lead to lapse in cultural knowledge. However, from what can be remembered and regained new forms of Aboriginal art have emerged.

Learning to Know

Art has been used in Aboriginal society, pre and post colonial, to teach laws and custom. From this medium practices of hunting and collecting food have been recorded. From art Aboriginal people learnt living skills as well as spirituality and then recorded these things to pass on to other people.. art was one of the methods of learning to know how to live.

Learning to do
Art is for history, biological teaching, teaching youth, relaxation, cultural connection, and identification.

Learning to live together
Through that art and exhibitions of the art more and more people are learning about the Aboriginal culture. Youth find it a fun way to learn in school education programs. Art is a universal medium for bridging gaps between cultures.

Learning to be
At first, Aboriginal culture is an area of interest until it becomes a life interest. The change in the depth of knowledge, understanding and identification with the Aboriginal culture changes are experienced every step of the way and expressed through art style. My mothers progression of learning what it meant to be Aboriginal was expressed through changes in her art. Her style became more individualistic and expressive of what Aboriginality meant for her.

Conclusion
With the evolution of culture come the evolution of art. The stolen generation, detached from tradition for part of their lives has introduced a freshness and originality into Indigenous Art

In my mother's case being separated from her cultures has given her the opportunity to explore mediums and styles without culture appropriation. It has also allowed Nainai to paint through these eyes of a herbalist, her life long interest, as well as through the eyes of an Indigenous person.

Nainai has also benefited from the teachings of Butchella Elder and Caboonya (Keeper of Records) Aunty Olga Miller. The blend of traditional and modern, or individualist methods of painting result in a new style of Indigenous art. The same experiences affect young Indigenous artists today.

Modern technology, has also allowed the flow of information across cultures and the introduction of new mediums and art tools. The uses of art have also diversified. Although it is still used to teach, it is now expanding the horizons of what it teaches.

Once upon a time Indigenous art was used to teach customs, hunting practices, Aboriginal Lore and the laws of our Land. In modern society Indigenous art has been used to promote culture, and cross cultural understanding as well as educating generations of all ages, in a multi-cultural society.

ABORIGINAL ART.....THEN

By Olga Miller

THE ARTIST....THEN

The beach wore golden gown
The bodice worked in sand-pearls
By crabs.
The artist passes, paused....
But in his surge of joy,
Clumsy touch betrayed the tender urge.

The little spider's web, hammocked
'tween tiny blades of grass,
wore rainbow beads.....
Jewels of the sun, delightful to see.

The artist looked and looked
And knew forever more,
The wonder of this filigree.

'Yindingie, Yindingie,
the beauty is here, and I, your man
know nothing.'

Olga Miller ©

What was it like, to be living here in Australia, thousands of years ago, before modern civilisation came to this unknown part of the world?

To the people then, their society was adequate for their needs, and knowing no other methods, were satisfied with their provisions for living.

LEARNING
It was the number one priority to teach their young. For them, the child had a right to be loved, fed, protected and educated.

The teaching was the responsibility of the Old Ones, for it was their belief that knowledge was gained by living. The older a person was, the more that person knew, for Life, itself, had been the instructor.

However, they did believe in the "NEED TO KNOW".

Five-year olds were taught only what five-year olds needed to know to keep them happy, healthy, protected and educated.

DOING
The Butchella people of the aborigines of Australia, believed in segregation, and this dividing began from childhood.

However, the little ones, boys and girls, being the sole responsibility of the Old Women, still learned and played together.

The Old Men were involved with the teaching of the boys from the age of ten years, onwards.

The little ones were taught mainly by the telling of stories. These stories always had the moral, 'if you are good you will be rewarded, and if you are not good, something will happen to you.'

In the stories, none of the characters were killed, and there was never any mention of blood-curdling situations.

Usually, the guilty character/ characters were magically changed into 'something else'.

DOING
To instill the first awareness of their strict LAWS, the children were taught the importance of three words..... OBEDIENCE, OBSERVATION and PATIENCE.

OBEDIENCE was paramount. If a walk among the rocks at low tide was in progress, and an Old Woman called out 'stop', everyone froze, even if one foot was still uplifted. The reason could be that one of the children was about to step on a deadly Cone shell, or had turned over a rock and was about to touch a blue-ringed octopus.

Then would follow a lesson, about the danger of these deadly creatures.

How did the Old Ones know? Because thousands of years ago someone had died from contact with these creatures, and realising what an important lesson could be taught from this event, the story of the danger these creatures was passed on, down through the ages, by word of mouth.

There was indeed a need to KNOW, here, for the little ones.

OBSERVATION
The little ones were firstly made aware of the simplest moods of nature.

The tide goes out, baring the rocks, enlarging the beach for Wide Games.

The tide comes in, and then it was a good time to have a swim.

Other more complex signs of nature were left for their older years of teaching

For example, the sun's progress during the day was pointed out, for there were strict rules concerning this too.

The disappearance of the sun and the coming of storm clouds were other important signs to be observed as well.

PATIENCE
Because there was only one big meal a day, when all the people ate together, the children had to learn to be patient.

It was allowable to gather berries, fruit and nuts to be consumed during the long day.

They learned also to gather shells when the tide was out, and these were filled with sea-water when the tide was in.

They were directed to place their shells of water, carefully, above the high-water mark, and to note the location of their individual group of shells.

The heat from the sun evaporated the sea-water, leaving a crust of salt as a lining.

This salt was licked by the children, and while being a dietary necessity, was the equivalent of a visit to the tuck shop, and a highlight of the day.

TRANSITION
The transition from play-group 'GUNDHUS' to male and female students began with the segregation of the sexes. The girls were in the sole care of the Clever Woman and her highly trained team of female teachers.

Likewise, the boys were taken by the Clever Man and his team of instructors.

Again, the Need to Know policy was followed, and the teaching was adapted according to the ages of the students.

Higher emphasis was placed on the learning of the THREE LAWS, and the stories now, were the GENESIS STORIES of their own nation.

They learned about the main god, who lived in the sky.

They learned about YINDINGIE, the messenger of this main god who came down and made3 everything for them.

And from these Genesis stories, they learned the reasons for having, not only very strict LAWS, but also very strict rules and taboos.

TOTEMS
They had to learn that not only the Nation had a totem, but all the clans had totems too.

The Totem was the equivalent of an identification logo, almost a religious denomination.

Because the overall Totem for the Butchella people was Yindingie's other self, the Carpet Snake, these snakes were never killed or eaten.

Additionally, the totem of the Clan a person was born into, had to be known and respected as well.

SIMPLE LOGIC
The learning, still based in the NEED TO KNOW and the three important words, OBEDIENCE, OBSERVATION and PATIENCE, was slowly taking them from childhood into adulthood.

The young male adult had to prepare for his Initiation Ceremony from the time he had been segregated as a child.

After yeas of intense training, the rigors of the final ceremony, were welcomed

The Initiation Ceremony meant that the young male had now left his mothers womb, and finally a whole man.

He was still not allowed to marry until he had proved that he would always put the community's needs before his own. It was not until after he had married, that he could indulge in any way personal interests he may have acquired along the way.

ART
Everyone, male and female, could draw, as the placing of individual marks or symbols on their possessions, denoted ownership.

The symbol of their clan told, not only from which family they came, but also the area of their clan's land.

However, there was an urge in some to reproduce something they had seen which had brought pleasure.

In areas of mainland Australia, where the people lived in the shelter of sand-stone over-hangs, a man could and did, decorate his gallery with his art-work.

A gallery could have replicas of boomerangs, woomeras, spear-heads and hands. I have even seen replicas of a baby's foot, and a kangaroo's tail. The images all told a story to be related around the fire.

Perhaps the baby had been the first grand-child; and was the kangaroo's tail the first kill, by a favourite son?

These images on the walls of the galleries were STENCILS. The object was held against the wall and a mixture of ochre, water and another ingredient was blown from the mouth until the outline was clearly defined.

These artists had to work with restricted colours.

Available, were red and yellow ochre, white pipe clay, and black was obtained from soft rocks.

However, there were ochre rocks too. To obtain the colour, the ochre stone was rubbed over a very wet piece of ordinary rock (chert). The paint obtained was used for body painting, done with a finger, or for fine-lining in galleries, using a twig.

But there was still a frustration for the artist, from being unable to repeat the beautiful colours he could see all around him.

RULES
There were very strict rules and taboos to be followed, also.

No man could ever draw a picture of another person showing the neck or the mouth. To do so would provide a means for the spirit of the person to leave the body, and enter the drawing, forever. So figures were always shown as stick-men.

X-RAY DRAWINGS
When it came to drawing animals and fish, the artist was always keen to show his knowledge of what was actually inside the object, and so the bones and organs were represented in some way. These were not STENCIL reproductions.

ETCHINGS
Another artist may have had only expanses of rock to use as his canvas, and a method of etching was devised. But it was found that when working on rock, a harder rock had to be used as the etching tool. This, surely, introduced the artist to the beginnings of GEOLOGY.

THE PROFESSIONALS
There was one clan of the six making up the Butchella Nation whose duty it was to record the history of the people in song and dance, and Art.

These were the men who had to learn their trade from adolescence. Because of the lack of galleries locally, I had asked, "where did they do their pictures?". The answer had been, "on themselves".

The seasonal changes brought the necessity for Ceremony.... To ask for a good harvest of the food particular to that season.

This clan provided the song and dance men, all elaborately decorated with the intricate ochre patterns befitting the occasion.

There would be other ceremonies too, when other men would need decoration, and the artists were in great demand.

Of course, they expected reimbursement in the form of some kind of barter.

INNOVATION
With restricted colours, there was also a need to devise the tools to execute their work.

Green twig, peeled of their bark and chewed, made brushes. Stems of thicker grasses, chewed and separated, were excellent for cross-hatching, while for fine-lining, the artists own hair was used.

STONE ARRANGEMENTS AND CARVINGS.
It was not until a man was a grandfather that he was enlightened of the mysteries of the STONE ARRANGEMENTS, found only in a secret place in the MEN'S AREA, on Fraser Island.

Here, the stones, all transported from the mainland, over the years, were laid out in symbolic design, known only to especially chosen OLD MEN.

The carvings on the trees around the site, also symbolic, were of such significance, that all who saw them, were never to mention them.

It was because of this jealously guarded secrecy, that the Old Ones swore never to pass on the History of their people.

Unfortunately, this included their own young people, and much has been lost.

Fortunately, some elders did not comply with this decision, and faithfully passed on the history. but only to their own family circle.

Today, however, we elders can only lead our young generation to the DOOR of EDUCATION THROUGH ART.

They must open this door, themselves.

Olga Miller.