

Aboriginal art emerges from two cultures

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In Australia, there are about 340,000 Aboriginals out of a total population of 18 million people. Many of them live in the big cities in Australia, where they share a history of loss of traditions, language and culture. The people of aboriginal background are the target of discrimination, political exclusion and urban ghettoisation. Alcohol, drugs abuse and a high rate of criminality are the most visible consequences. In the rural areas the break with the traditional way of life has been less abrupt, though life expectancy of these people is among the lowest in the world. This article, written by the curator of the Aboriginal Art Museum in the Netherlands, describes how aboriginal art is playing a role in development initiatives of these peoples.

The Aboriginals are the original inhabitants of Australia, and have lived there for at least 50,000 years. It is not really correct to talk of 'the' Aboriginals; like the native people of North America, there were many different groups peopling Australia, each with its own customs and language. It is estimated that when the English occupied Australia in 1788 there were about one million Aboriginals living on the continent, speaking some 250 different languages.

All Aboriginal peoples were nomadic. They did not practise agriculture or keep animals; they simply lived off the land. They moved around, carrying only what was strictly necessary with them. In traditional Aboriginal nomadic culture one does not acquire status through one's possessions but through one's knowledge. Material possessions are more of a nuisance than something to be valued.

Pictures

Aboriginals had no written language. They made patterns in the sand, on their bodies, on rocks and on utensils. These drawings are still an important element of ceremonial rituals. The images help pass knowledge on from generation to generation, but they are

of a transitory nature.

Traditional aboriginal culture is based on belief in the so-called Dreamtime. The Dreamtime is the period of creation, the time before time began. In the Dreamtime the mythical Ancestral Beings created the earth, and when the world was created they returned to the Dreaming, taking the form of a natural feature such as a rock or a water pool. For the Aboriginals the Ancestral Beings are still present in their land, and by carrying out ceremonies in certain places and at certain times, the Aboriginals confirm and reinforce their relation with the Ancestral Beings and the Dreamtime. The ceremonies involve song, dance and rituals, and sometimes last for several days. Paintings on the body and in the sand are also part of these ceremonies.

Changes

Much changed for the Aboriginals when the English arrived in 1788. The land was taken over by the English and many Aboriginals were forced to give up their nomadic lifestyle. They were settled at mission posts and were also used as cheap labour. Where they were considered to be a nuisance, they were simply killed off.

The Aboriginals were regarded by the settlers as primitive, wild beings who would eventually die out. A series of government measures, intended to solve the 'Aboriginal problem', were implemented over a period of 150 years, but the Aboriginals did not die out and finally the white men's view of the Aboriginals changed. In the 1970s Aboriginals achieved the right to determine their own position within Australian society.

In contrast to the situation in the urban

areas, in the desert areas and the tropical north the break with the traditional way of life has been less abrupt. A number of Aboriginal languages are still spoken and there are radio and television stations that broadcast in the local languages. Large areas of land are now also under the control of the original population. Non-Aboriginals have to obtain permission from the local Aboriginal Council of Elders to visit these areas. Traditional culture and background are often on the school curriculum, and the elderly are encouraged to record their knowledge for future generations. In these regions the art plays an important role in maintaining and continuing traditions. In urban areas, the Aboriginal art tends to show more of the issues arising from the problematic position of Aboriginal people in white Australian society.

Beginnings of Aboriginal art

Aboriginals from the desert community of Papunya gained access for the first time in 1971 to western materials such as acrylic paint and hardboard, and later canvas and paper. The elder men in the community started to use the materials to record traditional designs. They were encouraged to do this by a white schoolmaster, Geoffrey Bardon. Painting in a permanent medium meant that the Aboriginal picture language tradition from the desert became visible for the first time to the outside world.

The paintings include a strong spiritual dimension: the designs that are painted are all related to the mythical stories from the Dreamtime. They show where events from the Dreamtime took place, and which mythical Ancestral Beings were involved. Because each Dreamtime story is linked to a particular place, each painting is a representation of the land where the painter has his or her own roots. A u-form is the symbol for a person; a circle is an important spot in a landscape, such as a spring, an unusual rock formation, or a camp. For the content of a picture to



Helicopter Tjungurrayi. He started to paint in 1995 and has become very famous. He uses a linear style to paint subjects such as 'Dream Roads' and the places where his ancestors passed on to the 'Dreamtime'.



Elizabeth Nyomi was born around 1944 and started painting in 1988. All her paintings are variations on one central theme, her homeland Tapinna. Her work often includes aspects of aboriginal women's lives.

be further elucidated it is necessary for the artist to tell the story that belongs to it.

The men in Papunya began to recognise the importance of making the paintings, as it brought them back into contact with their own tradition and knowledge. The painting process has become an important way of passing on knowledge; painting is done together, and while it takes place the mythical stories are told and explained to the children. In addition, the paintings are also a good source of income.

Success

The outside world appreciates the beauty of Aboriginal paintings. The abstract forms and use of colour fitted well with the trends in western art during the 1970s. The extra layer of spiritual meaning from the still relatively unknown Aboriginal culture made the work even more interesting for the western public. Museums bought up the works and put on exhibitions. The paintings brought about a positive change in appreciation of Aboriginal culture, first in white Australia and later in the rest of the world. The act of painting is also of great importance to the painters themselves as well as their communities. It reinforces and confirms their bond with the tradition, as well as enables them to earn a good income and receive recognition of their cultural traditions.

Encouraged by the success of the paintings from Papunya, Aboriginals from other communities in the desert area started to paint towards the end of the 1970s. As the art from the desert

became increasingly successful, the art from other regions of Australia also started to develop. Every region has its own recognisable style, based on local style traditions. In the northern tropics paintings are done on bark, using natural pigments, and the illustrations are more figurative than in desert paintings. In the Kimberley area natural pigments are painted onto canvas and the land is painted from an abstract side view. Art from the Tiwi Islands is recognisable through its abstract, geometric patterns. Individual artists also started to experiment with colour, material and composition. By the end of the 1980s Aboriginal artists from the big towns in Australia were also becoming known.

In their own hands

Aboriginal art is a movement that arose within a period of thirty years, and it is certainly here to stay in the contemporary art world. There is a lively trade in Aboriginal art, and certain artists' work is very sought after. Many artists are now part of an art cooperative in their own community. These cooperatives are run by the Aboriginal Council of the community, and they ensure that a good price is paid for the works of art. In the cities of Australia there are galleries that show only the work of Aboriginal artists. The big auction houses, such as Sotheby's also hold annual Aboriginal art auctions, and Aboriginal art can now be found all over the world in museums and art galleries.

Europe has a museum devoted to Australian Aboriginal art since 2001: the Aboriginal Art Museum in Utrecht, the

Netherlands. This museum has an active exhibition policy, relying not only on the house collection but also works borrowed from other museums and private collections in Europe and Australia. Changing exhibitions allow the versatility of contemporary Aboriginal art to be shown, as the art is no longer restricted to paintings but also includes graphics, sculpture, photography and video art. The exhibitions are also complemented by an educational programme, guided tours, lectures and films. The museum is in a very special position: it is a museum for contemporary art that is not western and also not ethnic. It exhibits art that could only arise out of the contact between two cultures: Aboriginal and western culture.

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Four women sitting around a fire.



Parvally (1998) by Elizabeth Nyomi, collection Aboriginal Art Museum, The Netherlands. This painting shows Nyumi's people and their traditional homeland in the Great Sandy Desert in Australia. The landscape is dominated by parallel sand dunes. The dotted oval shapes are wooden carrying-dishes stuffed with bush food. The orange lines are digging-sticks used to gather food and for ceremonial purposes.

