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Before the Dots, before Papunya: Australian Aboriginal Crayon Drawings from Birrundudu, NT 1945

John E. Stanton

- 1 In 1945–46, Ronald M. Berndt collected some 600 drawings in crayon on sheets of brown paper (each approximately 42 x 61 centimeters in size) created by Aboriginal men living at Birrundudu, located in the North-Central Northern Territory approximately 690 kilometers south-southwest of Darwin, and 740 kilometers northwest of Papunya. This very isolated community was, and is still, a pastoral (i.e., cattle) station outcamp, some 200 kilometers by road from the nearest settlement, Kalkarindji, which is the former Wave Hill Station, site of the pastoral strike of the 1960s that led to the introduction of paid wages for Aboriginal labor in Australia's pastoral industry.
- 2 This paper focuses on the origins of the images and the intentions of the artists—even at that time—to engage with a much wider and public audience and analyzes the nature of Aboriginal depictions of people, country, and place prior to the commercialization of their art that started at Papunya in the early 1970s, some thirty years later. The Birrundudu drawings were created by Aboriginal men who had never previously used a pencil crayon or piece of paper. These drawings, which are held at the Berndt Museum of Anthropology at the University of Western Australia, are unique demonstrations of Aboriginal relationships through the Dreaming to their land and to each other.
- 3 Despite the importance the Berndts attributed to the Birrundudu collection, they wrote only a single paper, in 1950, focusing on the works—although they alluded to them in other publications. Their reflections on this particular collection still resonate in today's debate on the anthropology of art.

Art to the anthropologist is something more than just beautiful drawings, carvings or workmanship, possessed of graceful lines and aesthetic values—it is the external expression of the 'soul' of the people. It fulfils a vital need in the culture, and is dictated by tradition, religion and mythology. Art forms are nearly always symbolic

representations with a vast background of 'history' in the form of ritual and mythology.

- 4 It is poignant to note, given the theme of this conference, their comment of almost sixty years ago, long before the current interest in Australian Aboriginal art had emerged:

Birrundudu Outcamp

- 5 Ronald Berndt talked with me about Birrundudu in considerable detail on a number of occasions. Reflecting on the experience he and his wife had of living there, Berndt labeled the conditions there at that time as being the "most extremely shocking" physical environment of all their social anthropological fieldwork with Aboriginal communities over almost fifty years, "the most trying of our lives." He described the environment there as being "harsh": it was gripped in a thirty-year drought and the outstation was suffering severe environmental land degradation as a result of long-term overstocking and inappropriate pastoral activity. The Birrundudu Soak (the water hole that gives the place its name) was a central feature of life at the outstation. It is located on the intermittent Sturt Creek, running 1,000 kilometers westward to Lake Gregory (Malan) and was a key resource that provided the means of sustenance in what was otherwise a largely deserted region on the northern border of the Tanami Desert. At the time the Berndts were there, it was almost dry and filled with the rotting carcasses of long-dead cattle. The stench was, in Berndt's words to me, "unforgettable," yet this was the sole supply of water for the pastoral station and all its inhabitants, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.
- 6 Forty years later, Berndt was still shocked at his experience in such a depressing setting, especially by the treatment of the Aboriginal stockmen and their families by the white Overseer. Many people were starving although, according to Berndt, there were still plenty of rations in the Store—but these were not being distributed. Alcoholic non-Aboriginal staff, and the associated abuse of some Aboriginal women, created for the Berndts a singularly dreadful environment to be working in.
- 7 They recalled spending nights secretly trying to "fish" with a hook on the end of a line and stick for cans of tinned meat, through the screen barricade at the Store to give to the local people, who were starving. Days were spent arguing with the white Overseer, pleading for much needed food for the people. On several occasions, Ronald said, "It's the only time in my life I thought, if I'd only had a gun, I would have shot that bastard [the Overseer]." On another occasion, when the Overseer was tiring of their constant criticisms, he tried to encourage both the Berndts and their Aboriginal associates to travel south, to "better country," offering to transport them and some of the local people in his truck. "Certain death," Ron said, "that's what it really would have been—for all of us."
- 8 The country around Birrundudu, almost on the edge of the Tanami Desert, is flat, sparsely wooded and subject to flooding after heavy rain. The artists, local ritual custodians of the region, were members of several semi-nomadic groups whose original homelands extended from the area northwest to that southeast of Birrundudu. These groups had been attracted during the 1930s drought to Birrundudu Station in search of reliable water and food supplies. With the return of the drought in the mid-1940s, the

scene that confronted the Berndts on their arrival at Birrundudu was one of great suffering, and this was the context in which the crayon drawings were created.

- 9 The composition of the population at Birrundudu was complex, the result of these groups coming together for the first time. The language group that was specifically local to the immediate vicinity of Birrundudu was that of the Nyining. Linguistically and culturally, the Nyining were very closely related to the Djaru group, whose country lay immediately to the west of Birrundudu, but over the two decades since its establishment, the pastoral outstation camp attracted a diversity of Aboriginal people from the Waibri- and Woneiga-speaking groups, as well as Ngari (or Ngadi), Walmatjeri, and Gugadja, whose original homelands extended in a swath from the northwest to the southeast of Birrundudu. All these groups maintained regular cultural ties to localities later the sites of government service centers, such as Lajamanu, Yuendumu, and Papunya on the one hand, and Balgo Hills on the other.

The Artworks

- 10 The extraordinary artistic record of 600 drawings demonstrates how local Aboriginal people maintained the richness of their cultural knowledge and their certain and specific associations with the landscape within which they lived. The artworks reveal the enthusiastic embracing of new media such as wax crayons and brown paper to enhance the communication of cultural knowledge to an outsider—in this case, an anthropologist. The drawings are a tangible manifestation of long-held insight and accumulated learning, and an expression of the artists' desire to convey their knowledge to a wider audience.
- 11 As Ronald Berndt reflected almost forty years later,
The largest series [of crayon drawings] I obtained was at Birrundudu, in west-central Northern Territory (in 1944–5). I had run out of film. The people and I were worried that the large range of rituals I was witnessing could not be photographically covered. They appreciated that I was recording in writing and also making rough sketches. However, they suggested that they themselves should draw their rituals, ceremonies. Dreaming sites and so on. And that is what they did.
- 12 Anthropologists have used crayon drawings as a data collection technique for many years. Ronald Berndt had already been encouraged very early on in his professional career as an anthropologist by both Tindale and Mountford to employ crayons and brown paper to record, in a permanent medium, Aboriginal narratives and statements of cultural experience. Unlike their earlier experience at Ooldea, South Australia, where Ronald employed a “traditional” repertoire of colors—black, white, yellow, red, and brown—he did not seek at Birrundudu to restrict the repertoire of colored crayons used by Aboriginal men to document their world, the “country” within which they lived, and the mythic associations that emboldened their landscape. For no particular reason, blue, purple, orange, and pink were added to the artists' palette. This practice was repeated during the Berndts' subsequent work at Yirrkala, northeast Arnhem Land. The resulting imagery contained in the Birrundudu collection remains a forceful commentary on the ways in which ritual custodianship over land was being maintained, albeit in the most difficult physical and emotional circumstances. The men turned their minds with such alacrity to depicting afresh the underlying strengths of the *waldjeri*, as the Dreaming is known at Birrundudu, reinforcing their enduring

linkage to their land, a connection from which they found themselves increasingly distant due to processes of dislocation and relocation, even in 1945.

- 13 Much has been written about the notion of “the Dreaming,” as it has been translated in English. Its emphasis remains, however, on projecting past practice through the present and into the future. The drawings focus on images of “country,” of lands occupied by semi-nomadic Aboriginal groups and named by the activities of Dreaming beings. The notion of “country” was the leitmotif of Aboriginal identity, and this concept is just as significant in today’s world. The drawings refer to particular places, and to events that took place there in the *waldjeri*. In communicating particularity, cultural iconography originating in rock art and body painting (that is, the permanent and the impermanent) is used to communicate through symbolic form the artist’s understanding of the events that took place there—and, indeed, are believed to be still taking place.
- 14 Some drawings depict historical events, and some works depict elements such as fence-lines, windmill water pumps, and other features recording interactions with non-Aboriginal people. For the most part, though, the drawings focus on depicting elements of narrations associated with the activities of the Dreaming beings themselves. These beings lend names to places that, in turn, conjure associations of myth and performance. The items of iconic elements serve as mnemonic devices expressed through story and song.
- 15 In this context, engagement with the alien recorder required a mechanism of translation and explication. Ronald Berndt’s careful penciled annotation of each work, complete with the artist’s name and the date of collection, codifies in writing a definitive cultural interpretation of the composition that has been recorded directly from the artist himself at the time of collection. This original recording serves as a means of conveying the artist’s voice, verification for the work itself, a clear statement of knowledge and a legitimization of its transfer to an outsider for external consumption and appreciation.
- 16 Many of the works contain imagery that resonates with the widely recognizable style that was to emanate from Papunya and later to be documented at other communities; first at Yuendumu by Anderson and Dussart and then at Balgo by Berndt and Stanton, for example. Concentric or spiraling circles, lines signifying connectedness or spatial relationships, focus attention on key elements of the design. The rendering of specific elements varies widely between individual artists, as does their use of color. Artists preferred the use of particular color combinations, some retaining the ocher shades and others selecting a vibrant new palette. One artefact illustrates the rendition of landscape as a series of banded swathes of color, for example. It is worth noting that these broad commonalities of subject matter and style reflect the shared iconography throughout the region of the Western Desert cultural bloc. Choice of subject matter is an indicator not only of personal preference, but also of familial responsibilities to specific site complexes and track lines, locally termed *yiwarra*, left by the mythic beings as they travelled across the desert from one water hole or other important feature of the environment to the next.
- 17 For Ronald Berndt, these crayon drawings provided a vital means for Aboriginal “owners” to imagine and communicate to him the hidden layers of meaning associated with the landscape of their “country” that surrounded Birrundudu. The drawings were very different from items customarily collected by anthropologists in the field: they

were neither created within an orthodox cultural context of ceremony or ritualized activity, nor did they utilize “traditional” media of ground ochers, native kapok or the like. These images were collected for a different purpose. They reflected then current preoccupations and key responsibilities for knowledge held by the men who were the artists, but the designs were not executed by them for the benefit of ritual initiands. They were created for an interested visitor, an outsider, for him to learn about their lives and thoughts. For both the Berndts, collecting was shaped by the notion that objects had meaning, and that this coded meaning held clues to the understanding of broader social action over and above observable and explained behaviors. In encouraging the Birrundudu men to apply their designs in crayon on paper, Ronald was seeking to understand the nature of people’s relationship to the world they lived in, both to the land and its totemic landscape, and to those living in it.

- 18 The drawings were a new way of telling a story, a new form of transmitting knowledge, as well as reflecting on new experiences, from ceremonies introduced from, for example, the West Kimberley to the artifacts of the world of the pastoralists. The introduction of new elements to an artist’s repertoire mirrors their own experience of exposure to and discussion of alien items.
- 19 The crayon drawings provided a means by which senior Law-keepers could convey to the anthropologist further detailed understandings of their world, and of the relationships between their own people and their own place. These drawings emphasized the social relevance of the past (conceived of as a still-current past) in the present, as a source and reminder of ‘incontrovertible truths. [...] They were valedictory documents, ethnographic statements if you like.
- 20 They depict a landscape pregnant with meaning, rich through both analogy and direct association, a web of knowledge and energized sources. The living manifestations of these Dreaming beings permeate the landscape to provide a continually unfolding charter within which the living world of the present and the past is immutably and inextricably entwined.
- 21 To Ronald and Catherine Berndt, the crayon drawings were tangible manifestations of culture that provided a new means for ceremonial leaders at Birrundudu to communicate detailed information about their own cultures. The drawings affirm the knowledge and status of the individuals who created them, artists who used them to communicate their insight and understanding of the Dreaming Beings and their activities, all of which enriched their world with a mesh of meaning and provided a template for all social behavior.
- 22 From today’s perspective, thirty-five years after the emergence of the modern acrylic painting movement at Papunya, the Birrundudu drawings present us with a hitherto unrecognized depth of time, as well as of knowledge concerning the world of Aboriginal people living on the edge of the Tanami in the period immediately following the Second World War. The art works are more than merely aesthetic statements: they demonstrate the knowledge held by the artist of specific places and are imbued with a rich tapestry of meaning. The crayon drawings collected at Birrundudu in 1945 provide a clear statement of the earlier origins of Western Desert art as a means of communicating Desert culture to an outside world. Far from maintaining a sense of introspective isolation, Desert groups articulated long established linkages with other cultures through Dreaming tracks linking chains of long-distant sites, as well as by travelling ceremonies untied to land, *wundekulte* as Petri expressed it. The process of

transferring such concepts to paper with crayons was a logical step in reiterating, enhancing and also proclaiming to outsiders the strength of the *waldjeri* Law. The potency of the Birrundudu drawings does not in any way diminish the significance of the emergence of acrylic art in the early 1970s at Papunya, and the role of such art advisors as Geoff Bardon whose activities have, over a lengthy period, helped secure the reputation of the modern Desert painting movement on the world stage. These drawings from the 1940s reinforce our appreciation of the urge, perhaps even the urgency, which stimulated the artists to communicate with an external world, the world of wider Australia—and beyond.

- 23 The Birrundudu drawings exhibit their own flair for the aesthetic, their own preoccupations of subject matter and, above all, a distinctive treatment of temporality and sequence in conveying something of the detail of *waldjeri* knowledge. The drawings do not represent the totality of this knowledge: far from this, they represent a particularized glimpse into the mythic landscape as it existed in the minds of Aboriginal men at that period. The style of the drawings differs from that familiar in Western Desert acrylic art today. The repetition of iconic elements that became popular much later at Papunya and other centers of Desert art production are absent in the Birrundudu paintings, there are no crystalline arrays of concentric circles, no repetitive iconography—and no dots. The narratives contained in these drawings are nevertheless direct and unequivocal: there is no push towards obfuscation and concealment, as evidenced in the later works from the Western Desert region, perhaps a reflection of the dissimilar cultural context within which they were produced?
- 24 Strong stylistic variation between northern and Western Desert influences are typified by, in particular, the mixed use of both “map”-like and lateral perspectives, including figurative imagery and the introduction of alien elements such as windmills and pastoral fences introduced by Europeans. By his own account, Ronald Berndt (personal communication) made no attempt to suggest, much less, to delimit what the men chose to draw. He simply asked them to draw their own “country,” in order to teach him about it and the places there. This was a very different experience to that which was later to take place at Papunya where, according to Bier, writing about the first art advisor there, “Bardon used to tell them: ‘Nothing whitefella. No whitefella colour, no whitefella perspective, no whitefella images.’” The presence in the drawings of the human form, both realistically and in a highly conventionalized style, emphasizes the presence of people in the landscape, their relationships to each other and to particular places, just as occurred at communities such as Balgo and Yuendumu.
- 25 A recurrent theme emphasized the critical importance of ephemeral water sources, as well as the more durable *djimberi* rock-holes. There were naturally formed caverns in the rock, often deep enough to contain a person, filled with water in bountiful seasons. They were capped with brush and saplings, or sometimes covered with flat rocks as a screen to evaporation and to prevent animals like emu and kangaroo from falling in, desperate for water, and polluting the life-saving resource. Many drawings refer to the presence of both Dreaming beings, and of living men and women—themselves manifestations of the Dreaming beings.
- 26 A key consideration worth reiterating in discussing the Birrundudu drawings is that these works were created, not as artistic statements for a commercial market, but as a means of communicating cultural meaning and understanding to a wider community—albeit through an anthropologist. The drawings are fundamentally a conduit by which

the artists' knowledge can be imparted to the surrounding world, demonstrating the veracity of the artists' rights in land and documenting their current plight at Birrundudu. This is not to say that aesthetic considerations were absent from the works: they express extraordinary artistry and convey something of the sense of pleasure and delight these senior Aboriginal men had in their production.

- 27 The purpose and context within which these drawings were produced does, indeed, raise issues of how these works are to be read today, and by whom. What do they mean when they are exhibited, interpreted and shared by a present-day international community entirely divorced from the experience of life on the northern fringe of the Tanami Desert in 1945? How can meaning be communicated across cultures where there is no fundamental linkage? Is this art a bridge between cultures? Can it provide a key to sharing perspectives on land and its relationship to living people—even though these individuals were living some time ago? Inherent in such visual and tangible cultural expressions is the articulation of insight and experience, conveyed from one generation to the next, through ritualized processes of succession and the articulation of social responsibilities to the land itself.
- 28 Reflecting on the Birrundudu crayon drawing collection a few years later, Ronald and Catherine Berndt presaged the broader reception of Aboriginal art, indeed on the international stage with their comment:

Aboriginal art need not be allocated to the shelves of the past, nor lose its context when removed from its indigenous and traditional setting. It can, and should, take its place alongside other great schools of art, and be incorporated in our general appreciation of it for its own worth.
- 29 But at the same time these works were collected, the use of alien media, the utilization of crayons and brown paper, was little more than a means of rendering permanent the otherwise ephemeral manifestations of social discourse; of simple finger drawings in the sand of body paintings, sand paintings, of dance and performance; “mud maps” as they are colloquially known within the wider Australian community.
- 30 The multiple layers of meaning resonate with coded knowledge; in turn, it is this knowledge that informs the anthropologists' understanding of the world of the artist, or the creator. Other anthropologists have also considered the role of material cultural expressions in the transmission of culture. For example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett sees material objects not merely as an inanimate category, since they also include people, who are the living signs of the ethnographic endeavor. Rather than being referred to as ethnographic objects, she believes that items collected or otherwise obtained in the field are best termed “ethnographic fragments,” since their essentially fragmentary nature sets them apart from other items that remain within a particular community. The Birrundudu drawings held by the Berndt Museum are pieces of the story, a portion of the rich matrix that collectively manifests itself as social belief and cultural practice. Located now in Perth, distant from the land and cultures they represent, the drawings have a new context—and a new significance.
- 31 With the series of drawings they had collected at Birrundudu NT, the Berndts saw in these drawings:

how important it is to know the significance of a particular drawing. This we must know, for through their art manifestations we can come to understand the people themselves[...]Without its meanings an object, however beautiful, is dead, absolutely and irrevocably dead. Allocated to some museum which concerns itself largely with relics of the past, a past which can be re-created only from the

imagination of aliens, or ripped from its cultural context to serve an alien purpose, its death is just as definitely assured.

- 32 Their view expressed here was, perhaps, forty years ahead of its time. Indeed, the concerns it raises are not out of place today: contemporary curators are frequently preoccupied with issues regarding the re-contextualization of objects that are long removed from their cultural settings, and the interpretation of historical recordings in the current social environment. How will this be achieved, and for what purpose?
- 33 With the bequest of the Birrundudu collection to the Berndt Museum, and the recognition of the place of this collection as a benchmark of Western Desert art, plans are being prepared to develop a major exhibition of these works in collaboration with the descendants of the artists and their present-day communities. This project will highlight the re-emergence of the Birrundudu artists in the public eye, rejuvenating appreciation for these works and providing a contemporary context for their admiration and critical reception, just as the Berndt Museum has done in other community-based collaborations.
- 34 Indigenous custodians are today calling for collaboration in the control and management of their ritual materials, and this is the case in Australia as it is elsewhere. The issue was highlighted by the debate that surrounded the exhibition of secret-sacred men's objects by Marc Couturier in the *SECRETS* exhibition he was commissioned to mount at MAAO as recently as 2001. Museums have a vital role in this process, to promote collaborative partnerships and to inspire new approaches, just as the Musée du Quai Branly has done with the commission of outstanding Aboriginal art works as decorative finishes for its building. Museums have a responsibility, and a history, of redefining themselves—and “the other.”
- One of the greatest myths about the museum is that it is an oasis of calm untouched by the storms of politics and history. Nothing could be further from the truth. Over time, the museum has responded to political and social shifts with seismic precision. Its very success is the result of exceptional flexibility and capacity to adapt – a capacity other cultural institutions do not share.
- 35 The Birrundudu drawings depict a world not only of Dreaming beings, but of living people, too. In many ways, each of these is a manifestation of the other; the inclusion of external imagery, of innovative devices in “telling the story,” does not simply reflect aspects of the world of the European invaders. These motifs also demonstrate the *incorporation* of elements from the “outside” world into a distinctively Aboriginal realm and the internalization through interpretation and potential adoption or rejection. Such processes of cultural adaptation have been noted elsewhere in the Western Desert; for example, in the iconography of traded pearlshell and ceremonial knowledge. Though this very process, Aboriginal people have gained through their own introspection an interpretation and an understanding of their world, being empowered by this process as well as contributing to the debate on what it is to be “Australian.” Images pertaining to the Western world are not limited to these drawings, of course: there are many other examples of artifacts and rock art that incorporate the world of “the other”; that is, the world of “us” non-Aboriginal people. Their presence, though, in these early drawings are a persuasive testimony to both the adaptive, and the creative, forces that lie within the Dreaming, then—as now.

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RÉSUMÉS

In 1944–45, Ronald M. Berndt collected a large number of crayon drawings on brown paper from Aboriginal men living at Birrindudu, North-Central Northern Territory. The artists were of semi-nomadic groups whose original homelands extended from north-west to south-east of Birrindudu. These people maintained cultural ties to localities later known as the government centres of Papunya and Yuendumu on the one hand, and Balgo Hills on the other, although at that time the more recent art developments of Central Australia, especially Papunya, had not even been foreshadowed.

This paper analyses the nature of Aboriginal depictions of people, country and place prior to the commercialisation of their art in the early 1970s, thirty years later. It examines the context in which this art was produced, and the narration of symbol and meaning. It draws heavily on the Museum's unique collection of these works, hitherto largely unpublished, and contrasts the highly figurative imagery of the drawings with later stylised manifestations from culturally related Aboriginal art-producing communities. The paper focuses on the origins of the images and the intentions of the artists even at that time to engage with a wider and public audience.

AUTEUR

JOHN E. STANTON

MA Anthropology (Auckland) 1973 PhD Anthropology (Western Australia) 1994. Director, Berndt Museum of Anthropology, The University of Western Australia 1980–present. John Stanton has extensive experience and involvement in the area of Aboriginal arts, collaborating in several publications with the late R.M. and C.H. Berndt, as well as mounting twelve major national travelling exhibitions. He has also maintained ongoing research programmes in the Western Desert region of Western Australia, the Kimberley region of North-West Western Australia and the South-West of the State, which have focused on assisting Aboriginal communities to establish local Keeping Places and Cultural Centres. These projects, initiated at the request of local

communities, have involved the training of Aboriginal people in curatorial and exhibition techniques, oral history recording, etc. and complement the Museum's focus on contemporary arts: they are central to the Museum's outreach programme to Western Australian Aboriginal communities. Central to this is the Bringing the Photographs Home project, involving the digitisation and restitution to Aboriginal communities of the Museum's collection of historical photographs, as well as a project in collaboration with the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research (Australian National University) and Museum Victoria (Melbourne) to develop a prototype Web-based search engine to facilitate Aboriginal community access to museum collections.