

Harvesting traditional knowledge: The conservation of Indigenous Australian bark paintings

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ABSTRACT

The Arnhem bark painting movement is an important Australian art movement. For Aboriginal artists, it supports the continuation and transference of traditional knowledge, the development of new cultural expressions, and economic opportunity. As a result of the success of this movement, there is a steady flow of bark paintings from art centres to institutions. There are at times, however, differing perspectives regarding the fragility and care of these works. In order to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical conservation treatment approaches to Indigenous Australian bark paint-

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in how conservation theory and practice can be informed by community knowledge (Clavir 2002, Sully 2007). This involves both content creation and communication pathways. This paper discusses the exchange between Indigenous artists and conservation professionals that occurred during the Harvesting Traditional Knowledge bark painting workshop at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala, Northern Territory, Australia in May 2013. Initiated and managed by the Association of Northern, Kimberley Arnhem, Aboriginal Artists (ANKAAA), the project brought together Indigenous traditional knowledge masters, Indigenous art workers from Aboriginal-run art centres and conservators from around Australia to share approaches to materials conservation. The aim of the workshop was to bring conservators to where bark paintings are produced, to open up dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous custodians of painted bark artworks, and enable dialogue about the production and care of bark paintings. This workshop was an attempt to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical conservation approaches to Indigenous Australian bark paintings and to increase opportunities for individual artists to be involved in key decision making processes of how institutions care for Indigenous collections. The project emphasized the critical role of Indigenous knowledge in conservation decision-making, as well as the importance of non-Indigenous custodians understanding the physical and spiritual nature of these objects.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

With limited opportunity for exchange between Indigenous knowledge holders in remote communities and conservation professionals working in the major cities in Australia; little opportunity for Indigenous knowledge holders to contribute to cultural material-related science; and little opportunity for Indigenous arts professionals with traditional knowledge to work with our major cultural institutions on the conservation of Aboriginal collections, finding ways for information sharing, developing shared understanding and agreeing on preferred treatment methods is a challenge.

The Harvesting Traditional Knowledge project was implemented by ANKAAA in 2013, together with its partners – the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne (CCMC), The

ings, the Harvesting Traditional Knowledge project brought together senior knowledge holders and artists in Indigenous communities with conservators to share knowledge about the production and care of bark paintings. This paper examines the ways in which this project brought new knowledge to conservation decision making and highlighted the importance of shared knowledge to support best practice in the production and care of Australian bark paintings.



Figure 1
Harvesting of bark by Buku-Larrnggay Mulka
Centre artists

Mulka Project at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre (Northern Territory) and the Mowanjum Art Centre (Western Australia). Comprising four workshops – bark painting (held at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre); wood, fibre, ochre and shell (held at the Mowanjum Art Centre); string (held as part of ANKAAA Annual Conference); and new media – the fundamental aim of the project was to have a broad segment of practicing conservators ‘on-country’ in order to build effective networks and bring together people who have a stake in the industry. This was the first time that conservators were invited on-country to meet with Indigenous masters and artists and discuss common issues and concerns.

The location of the workshop in Yirrkala, in northeast Arnhem Land, was significant, as the area is strongly linked to the emergence of the Aboriginal bark painting movement and the Yolngu people have maintained their millennia-old culture throughout the region. Inviting conservators on-country provided an opportunity for Yolngu to share their knowledge with professionals, who in turn gained an understanding of the practices and protocols involved in the production of bark painting.

THE PRODUCTION OF BARK PAINTINGS

The production of bark paintings is a complex set of activities that intersect with community responsibility for caring for people and land, social and economic outcomes from production and trade, and cultural maintenance and empowerment (Sutton 1988, 61). The bark painting movement across northern Australia is a relatively recent movement that began with the sale of bark paintings to anthropologists and from missions in the early 20th century. The tyranny of distance made access to these paintings difficult until the middle of the 20th century, but with the opening up of northern Australia in the 1960s a sustainable trade emerged, initially brokered by the missions and then later through the development of community art centres. The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala, which was established in 1975, became a significant centre for bark painting production and is renowned for its great painters.

The production of bark painting requires a broad set of skills and knowledge. Traditionally, the bark is stripped from the *Eucalyptus Tetradonta* tree (stringybark) (Figure 1), heated over a fire and then laid down under weight to make it flat. The bark may also be left to flatten for several days by burying it in sand or placing it under weights (Boustead 1966, 199). The thermodynamics of wood and wood products is well understood by Aboriginal people who use fire in the production of other artefacts, such as straightening spears and making *Larrakitj* (hollow logs).

Traditionally, ochres were sourced from the painter’s own country or through trade (Rose 1942, 170) and the palette reflected available pigments. These colours can also relate to the clan group, the moiety of the painter and the story that is depicted in the painting. It is possible to read the clan affiliation, the legal and social responsibilities of the artist through the designs in the painting. The use of ochre aligns with other practices, including body and rock painting, and object decoration. In the past, the binder used in bark painting came from various sources, including the

well-documented use of orchid juice, tree sap or gum, sometimes mixed with honey and wax, and egg yolk (Rose 1942, 170; Boustead 1966, 199; Gatenby 1996, 47). Wukun Wanambi described how orchid juice was used as a binder for pigment, either through rubbing it onto the surface prior to painting, or by crushing it into the ochre to act as a medium (Ellersdorfer et al. 2012, 34). Today, at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, the artists continue to utilize the same traditional palette, thereby subscribing to the cultural values that have been inscribed in Yolngu art practice for millennia, but on advice of conservators, employ PVA as the binder.

The production of bark painting draws on a complex interdisciplinary and cross-cultural knowledge base. In the case of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yolngu physics, chemistry, and botany contribute to an understanding of the thermo-responsive nature of barks and the ways they can be manipulated during production. Yolngu history, law and lore, and the personal preference of the artist, inform subject matter.

CONSERVATION TREATMENT OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN BARK PAINTINGS

Non-Indigenous (conservators') approach

The treatment of bark paintings is complex for conservators. Indigenous Australian bark paintings, comprised of a hygroscopic bark support and often, particularly in the past, underbound friable pigments, can present complex degradation and preservation issues (Smith and Roth 2002, Tworek-Matuszkiewicz 2007). While conservators are trained to understand materials, there is limited training or opportunity to explore the intangible aspects of these artefacts, which are intrinsic to the object and essential to their overall preservation. Important to the conservation treatment of Australian Aboriginal bark paintings is 'an appreciation of their unique cultural significance, knowledge of their history and thorough understanding of the specific materials and techniques' (Tworek-Matuszkiewicz 2007, 15).

To date, limited information has been available to conservators working within Australia regarding the knowledge and opinions of Indigenous artists. There has also been limited collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people regarding conservation and preservation approaches. The distance between remote Indigenous art centres and major collecting institutions and collectors makes it difficult to talk with artists, face to face, and therefore difficult to gain the knowledge and develop ethical guidelines to assist conservators in making appropriate decisions relating to conservation treatment. The Harvesting Traditional Knowledge workshop at Yirrkala facilitated the development of such guidelines and ethical approaches by building relationships with Indigenous artists, elders and community, and by providing opportunity for communication on-country.

At present, the conservators' approach to the conservation treatment of bark paintings can best be described as one of minimal intervention. Conservation treatments typically involve the consolidation of friable paint media, consolidation and stabilization of the bark support, and preparation of custom-made supports for storage, handling and display

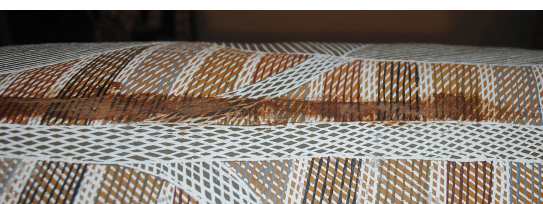


Figure 2
Consolidation of bark with sawdust and PVA

Figure 3
Buku-Larrnggay Mulka artist filling splits in bark

Figure 4
Fill, prior to inpainting

Figure 5
Inpainting by Buku-Larrnggay Mulka artist

(Coote 1995). Unlike the common aesthetic treatment approach to Western-style paintings, reintegration of loss is generally not undertaken. Minimal intervention is standard practice, but remains uninformed by understanding and knowledge of Indigenous art practice and Indigenous ideas about preservation (Coote 1998).

The limited knowledge conservators have of traditional materials used by Indigenous artists, in both the creation of art and treatment and preservation methods, means that conservators rely on standard conservation materials and techniques (Tworek-Matuszkiewicz 2007), rather than those aligned with Aboriginal art practice. The question about whether conservators should be adopting a more traditional material for conservation treatments on traditionally produced works, such as natural locally sourced binders, and who should decide what material is used, remains largely unanswered. Similarly, negotiating the role of the artist in considerations relating to the decision to reintegrate areas of loss, especially when it means that part of the story-creating image is lost, is unclear; as is the extent to which the role of the artist or artist's representative overrides that of the conservator.

Indigenous approach

Typically, remote Indigenous art centres employ local artists and art workers to harvest and prepare the barks for painting (Figure 1). Art centre workers may also undertake remedial conservation treatment before the sale or exhibition of compromised contemporary bark paintings. While concepts and processes undertaken by Indigenous art workers are similar to those of the conservator, with stabilization a key concern, the materials employed vary, as does consideration for reversibility and approaches to inpainting or overpainting.

Indigenous art workers use traditional materials or readily available synthetic products for remedial treatment, rather than conservation-grade materials found in the conservation laboratory. Typically, treatment carried out not only includes stabilization, but also heating any barks that start to return to their original curled state. Aesthetic treatment involves the reintegration of loss or filling splits that have formed in the support. Usually the nominated arts worker, the artist, or a member of the artist's family undertakes the reintegration of loss. Reintegration involves sanding back the surface of the paint layer and bark to recreate a flat surface, and filling the void with sawdust from the bark mixed with adhesive (polyvinyl acetate) (Figures 2–3) before repainting the area with the original painting materials used by the artist, which today mainly comprise of natural ochres bound in polyvinyl acetate (Figures 4–5). Filling and repainting are broad, and the painting of loss and fills by an arts worker, rather than by the artist, is not considered as invasive; an approach at odds with that of conservators. Reheating of the barks using direct heat at high temperatures (through a blow-torch) is a relatively new technique being explored at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre (Figure 6). This is undertaken once the bark has been painted and starts to show signs of re-curling. Barks are also being prepared in this method to rapidly drive out the moisture and speed up the flattening process. This is partially driven by the demand from artists for barks.



Figure 6

Buku-Larrnggay Mulka artist heating bark with blowtorch

Figure 7

Demonstration and discussion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants

Figure 8

Demonstration and discussion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants

Unlike the contemporary bark paintings, which are largely produced for sale, historic works within the art centre collections, integral to the community and its cultural heritage, are not treated on-site by Indigenous art workers. Rather, these artefacts are left in their current condition, with preservation as the course of action in the care of these artefacts.

Outcomes of the Harvesting Traditional Knowledge workshop

The exchange of conservators and senior Indigenous knowledge holders, artists and art centre workers at the bark painting workshop signalled a start in bridging the gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous conservation practices for the treatment of Indigenous artefacts (Figure 7). The format of the Harvesting Traditional Knowledge workshop was integral to the advancement of the conservation treatment of bark paintings in Australia. By bringing together various Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups on-country in an open and practical forum, clear discussions about process and practice could commence (Figure 8). Aboriginal people led conservators in harvesting barks and the two groups worked side by side so that knowledge transfer was embedded in the practice and discussion, rather than in formal lectures or presentations. The ability to observe and spend time with the artists in order to gain a sense of shared values and purpose, as well as understanding of differences, was an important process of the knowledge transfer. While there are, as yet, no definite conclusions, steps for continued conservation and preservation practice were established.

Consultation and community representation

Bark paintings from the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre that exhibited some typical problems, such as cracking in the bark support and flaking of the paint layer, were used to drive the discussion. This enabled open dialogue focusing on how conservation treatment might best be approached (Figure 8).

Indigenous representatives from various art centres were asked to comment on the process for restoring their community's paintings. The answers varied. Some thought it appropriate for conservators to reintegrate areas of loss, to keep the stories strong, while others thought it more appropriate to have the artist or artist's family undertake the work. Some artists and elders thought it appropriate to use traditional materials, while others thought it appropriate to use materials that would best preserve the artefacts and not contribute to potential problems in the future, such as adhesives that attract insects or biological attack. The discussions indicate that continued dialogue and ongoing relationship building is essential when approaching the conservation of an individual item. This approach could be considered to be similar to the processes developed for the conservation of contemporary art by the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), whereby artists are interviewed to record the most appropriate methods for the conservation and preservation of their work. This workshop has resulted in the need for an agreed framework for conservators when working with Indigenous artists and communities. The need for proper consultation and development of appropriate structures in which this can occur, emerged, unsurprisingly, as a key consideration

from the workshop. The need to keep these structures uncomplicated, such as a phone call or an e-mail to an arts centre, underscored the fact that it is possible to engender change simply and effectively.

Education and training

The Harvesting Traditional Knowledge workshop investigated a model whereby remote Yolngu arts workers would have a pathway to take on an acknowledged role as conservators in institutions. This reflects the aims of ANKAAA to ensure the continued education and support of Indigenous art workers in conservation, an outcome identified as necessary. These aims are reflected in ANKAAA's Arts Worker Extension Program: an intensive professional development program for high-achieving, long-serving Indigenous which began in 2010. The program is designed to increase the professional skills and industry networks of art workers from the ANKAAA membership, in order to enable them to further their careers in Indigenous art centres (ANKAAA 2010). The program covers aspects of arts management and includes an introduction to conservation theory and practice. This conservation training, which provides a practical approach to learning, and which is highly relevant to their jobs at their art centre, has been highly successful. Basic training introduces the art worker to the theory of conservation practice, materials conservation and preservation, and both the participants and the conservators benefit from opportunities for sharing technical and cultural knowledge. In the longer term, there needs to be support for Indigenous students to enter university programs to further their skills and understanding of conservation practice, whether through remote learning or university-based programs. Similarly, conservators need support to visit remote art centres and spend time learning from art workers, senior knowledge holders and practitioners.

Research and development

The workshop raised possibilities for further materials science research focusing on bark paintings. This may include examining the conservation implications that may stem from in the preparation of the barks, an understanding of best choices for painting materials, and effective ways to incorporate Indigenous methods of conservation/restoration into laboratory-based practice.

Investigation of the long-term stability of barks that have had direct heat treatment against those prepared in more traditional ways, such as over fire and under weights, is an area of shared interest. Some conservators expressed concerns about these preparation methods, which they felt could result in the curling of the barks back into their original shape once painted, but with no empirical studies this concern may be ill-founded. Many conservators found the drying of barks with a blowtorch confronting, concerned that this technique may have adverse effects if undertaken on painted works, potentially softening and causing a break down of the PVA binder over time, as well as potential colour change to the natural ochres. At present, these suppositions remain untested.

Best strategies for communication between remote Indigenous art centres and conservators in the major cities also require research and development.

CONCLUSION

The Harvesting Traditional Knowledge project provided opportunities for the development of new knowledge by bringing together conservation professionals with Aboriginal elders, artists, and art workers to share different approaches to the conservation of Australian Indigenous bark paintings. It made it clear that within Aboriginal art centres, and Aboriginal communities more generally, conservation practice is an important activity associated with the production and maintenance of cultural material, and is not simply the purview of professional conservators.

The workshop enabled conservators to think further about the approaches to conservation treatment, including what constitutes best practice in decision making, communication, documentation, treatment and the research of bark paintings. It enabled Aboriginal art workers to think further about the approaches to the care and conservation of their communities' cultural material held in institutions far away from the community. Each of these areas presents a complex set of requirements that will be addressed over the next three years as part of a coordinated and sustained program of research. The repositioning of Indigenous identity and knowledge as central to the conservation of bark paintings is critical.

The Harvesting Traditional Knowledge workshop created relationships that will be ongoing, increasing knowledge in conservation laboratories and art centres, and helping to ensure that Indigenous knowledge holders are central to the preservation process. As the workshop demonstrated, custodians of traditional knowledge are willing to share their knowledge. In the past there has been a divide between highly populated centres and regional and 'remote' Australia; however, as this workshop demonstrated, those living in communities and homelands of north Australia can and should be consulted. The building of active relationships and networks to have a respectful conversation gives empowerment to Indigenous communities and guidance to the conservation profession.

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