Diversity & Art: A Virtual Tour

Jimmy Mijau Mijau

Australia (c. 1897-1985)

Three Dancing Women
Aboriginal Art of Australia
Aboriginal Australians are Australia’s indigenous people, whose presence on the continent dates back more than 40,000 years. Their culture is considered the longest surviving culture in human history. Living isolated and seminomadic lives in separate and distinct clans, each group of Aboriginals has developed its own unique stories, laws, sacred symbols and traditions, a belief system that defines their particular society and identity, making up what can best be translated as the Dreaming or the Dreamline.

The Dreamline is the way that the Aboriginal people of Australia explain the world, their origin and life, defining the way they are to interact with their environment and the land, which they consider sacred. Transmitting knowledge of the Dreamline is consequently crucial to their survival both as individuals and as communities. With no written language, Australian Aboriginal societies have traditionally relied on art as language, using it to pass on their belief system to younger generations and ultimately preserve their culture.

While the materials and media used span across many of the Australian Aboriginal communities, the stories, images and symbols, do not. Each Aboriginal clan has developed its own unique set of stories, which belong exclusively to them, and cannot be painted by members of other clans. Materials used are what is readily available, and include painting leaves and tree bark, wood and rock carving, sculpting, weaving, ceremonial clothing, body painting, as well as sand painting, with most being of ephemeral nature with little hope of providing long-term documentation or preservation, and mostly produced for instructional or ceremonial purposes.

Depictions on bark are relatively modern, with the oldest bark painting found at the British Museum and dating back to the 19th century. The most common type of bark used to depict these ancient stories comes from the Eucalyptus tree, otherwise known as Stringybark. Removed during the wet season when it is easier to do so, the bark is heated over fire to remove the moisture. It is then weighted down with rocks to make it flat and is left to dry in the sun. Finally, when the fibrous and stringy inner surface is rubbed smooth, it is ready to paint on with natural colors from the earth.

In the 1970s, a schoolteacher introduced the Aborigines to contemporary materials such as paints, brushes, and canvas, encouraging them to make more permanent versions of their art. The movement which has brought great attention to Aboriginal art has helped strengthen Aboriginal culture, not only by providing critical income for indigenous families, but also reviving the culture itself, transmitting Aboriginal languages and knowledge of traditional values beyond their borders, while also allowing the Aboriginal people to assert themselves in the pantheon of Australian life and culture.

About Three Dancing Women

Mijau Mijau’s early works were mostly commissioned by anthropologists. The acknowledged Aboriginal bark painter, Mijau Mijau depicted the ancient stories and symbols that people in his clan would paint on their bodies, as well as designs that had been made on rocks. In addition to the human figure, his works also include images of animals, such as kangaroos, snakes, fish, and turtles, among others.

His Three Dancing Women, an image of three tall and slender female figures performing a ceremonial dance, are painted against a red ochre background. The figures, especially their circular heads, feature cross-hatching, that is crisscrossed lines that sit at an angle with each other. The females are representative of the Mimih spirits of the Arnhem Land, have thin and elongated bodies and are supposed to be in crevices between rocks. The Dreamline of Mijau Mijau’s clan believes that they taught the Aboriginal people how to hunt animals for food.

About the Artist

From the 1940s on, Aboriginal Australian artist Jimmy Mijau Mijau or Midjawmidjaw became one of the most recognized artists from the Western Arnhem Land, located in northern Australia. He was born to the Aboriginal Community of Minjilang, formerly known as Mission Bay on Croker Island, and spoke Kunwinjku, an Aboriginal language of Northern Australia.

In the 1960s, Mijau Mijau was one among a group of dynamic artists on Crocker Island who developed their own recognizable style of Western Arnhem Land, with cross-hatched figures placed on a red ochre background. Working closely with archaeologists who collected bark paintings, the group gained attention and brought modern bark painting to the forefront.

Mijau Mijau has had many exhibitions, including at the Watters Gallery in Sydney, one of Australia’s most innovative contemporary art galleries. His works are also included in many collections around the world.

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