



Painting with Unknown Animal, c. 1960-65

2004.0002.001

Jackson Jacob (Thunalgunaldin)

Lardil language group, Mornington Island

Eucalyptus Bark and red, yellow, white, and black ochre

In this elongated eucalyptus bark painting, a mythical creature is surrounded by fish. The fish and the creature are decorated with cross hatching, dotting, and sectioning of yellow, black, red, and white paint. These paints are suspected to be ochre, but this has not been confirmed. The creature itself has a long, graceful neck with an alligator-like body and a fish's tail. The head is very unique because of its hairy horn and its toothless mouth, resembling a bird's bill. This painting is characteristic of bark paintings by the Lardil people of Mornington Island, Queensland in the following ways: the stretchers on both ends of the piece are painted, the loose cross hatching style is different than the cross hatching of Arnhem Land, and it is compositionally similar to other pieces by Mornington Island artists during the same period.

In the mid-1960s Dr. John Cawte, who studied Aboriginal medicine, first acquired this piece and then later passed it on as a gift to Dr. Knight Aldrich who donated the piece along with a boomerang to the Kluge-Ruhe Collection in 2004. Dr. Aldrich was under the impression when he donated the piece that the subject represented a stomach ailment.

After investigation, it is clear that the mysterious creature is a representation of *Bun Bun*. *Bun Bun* is a local totem that has its sacred site in south-east Mornington Island in the Larumbenda clan of the Lardil community (Memcott, email correspondence, 2013). Because *Bun Bun* is a coastal totem, it has the power to give a person *malkri* or *malgri* sickness, which is characterized by abdominal pain, constipation, tiredness, and sometimes vomiting. *Malkri* sickness is usually inflicted by *Bun Bun* with assistance from *Thuwathu* the Rainbow Serpent, whose actions and movements created and formed the landscape of Mornington Island. Today it is believed that "his energies are not only in all the places that he made...but extend through the marine and littoral systems of the Wellesley Islands" (Memcott, 1982). *Bun Bun* and *Thuwathu* are likely to inflict *malkri* sickness on a person if he or she breaks *Thuwathu's* law that prohibits the mixing of land and sea foods, or any contact between land and sea food, fluids or smells. More information on the cause of *malkri* sickness can be found in Paul Memcott's article *Rainbows, Story Places and Malkri Sickness in the North Wellesley Islands* (Memcott, 1982).

The artist is most likely Jackson Jacob. In *The Heart of Everything*, an untitled piece by Jacob has striking visual similarities to this piece (24). Also, according to Paul Memcott, *Bun Bun's* 'story place' is in the estate of the Jacob clan. Alternatively, the artist could be Lindsey Roughsey, who also had permission to depict *Bun Bun*; however, most other works by Roughsey are signed as a marker of his leadership in the painting movement on the Island, and this work is not signed. Memcott also specifically recalled a time when Jackson Jacob himself explained *Bun Bun's* association with *malkri* sickness.

It is estimated that the painting was made between 1960 and 1965. Stylistically the piece looks more like the works made on the Island in the late-1960s or early-1970s, but since Cawte acquired the boomerang in the mid-1960s and Memcott believes it likely was collected at the same time, this painting could not have been made after this time. In the context of the Mornington Island art movement, this piece might be seen as an early example of a developing style.

Bibliography

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Artworks

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Acc. 1993.0004.187
- Roughsey, Lindsay. *Lizard-like creature with frill-neck surrounded by fish*, 1969. Macquarie Gallery Collection, National Museum of Australia, Canberra.
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Email Correspondence

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