



Men Hunting with Rifles, c. 1959-62

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Mungguraway Yunupingu (1907-79)

Yolngu language group, Gumatj clan, Yirrkala, Arnhem Land

Eucalyptus bark with natural ochres

In this eucalyptus bark painting, two men with rifles are depicted hunting wild emus in Arnhem Land in northern Australia. At the top of the piece is a watering hole and an emu eating berries (*livistona Australis*), known locally as “emu food.” In the background the artist has painted clan patterns of diamonds and crossing lines. Using yellow, red, black, and white ochres, this painting is most likely about Macassans and their influence on Aboriginal culture in Arnhem Land. The main subjects are colored with yellow ochre, while all of the pigments are used for the clan patterns which cover the background.

In the height and rise of Aboriginal art in Arnhem Land, Dr. Stuart Scougall and Tony Tuckson commissioned bark paintings from 1959-62 in Yirrkala. The clan designs in this painting are consistent with the Yolngu Gumatj people and the use of eucalyptus bark supports the idea that it is from Yirrkala. It’s likely that this work was purchased by Geoffrey Spence from the mission at Yirrkala at the time of the commissions. It’s unknown whether Spence purchased this work from the artist directly, from the Yirrkala mission, or from Scougall and Tuckson. We do know that Edward Ruhe purchased this work from Geoffrey Spence.

Upon examination of this work, it is suspected that the artist is Mungguraway Yunupingu (1907-79) of the Gumatj clan. Born and raised in Yirrkala, Mungguraway was a prominent painter of his time. According to Dr. Howard Morphy, “The overall balance of colours with a significant use of yellow ochre is characteristic of his [Mungguraway’s] works.” The shapes and formation of the people are typical of Mungguraway; they are seen with long bodies and broad shoulders. “Mungguraway was the main Gumatj artist painting during the mission period. The other was Bununggu but his style was different - his cross hatching is neater,” wrote Dr. Morphy. Another key characteristic are the designs of the Gumatj clan, of which Mungguraway was a member. The diamonds and crossed lines represent fire (*gurtha*) and saltwater crocodiles (*baru*), which are clan totems.

It is unclear whether the human figures depicted in this painting represent Aboriginal hunters, visiting Macassan people from Indonesia, or white Australians. All three subjects have appeared in previous paintings by Mungguraway in various color palettes. For instance, in “*Man Landing on the Moon*”, another painting in the Kluge-Ruhe Collection, Mungguraway used yellow ochre to specifically depict the American astronauts. However, Yolngu art is full of multiple references and symbolism so we can’t conclude definitively that the use of ochre in one painting determines its meaning in another.

However, after consulting with knowledgeable scholars, it seems most likely that the people represented in the painting are Macassan men with rifles. The Macassans were from Makassar, now part of Indonesia. They harvested trepang (sea cucumber) off Arnhem Land’s coast and then sold them to China for medicinal and culinary purposes. The Macassans, according to Howard Morphy, also brought along rifles for hunting purposes. “You can see next to one of the guns is the drawing of a stick, which is probably the digging stick associated with digging up yellow ochre from the quarry.” Also, to the right of the watering hole at the top is an anvil shape, suggesting the cloud that forms at the start of the wet season when the Macassans

arrived each year. On the other side of the watering hole is a design that likely refers to cooking trepang, again associated with the Macassans. All of this evidence makes it likely that this painting depicts some part of the relationship Mungguraway's people had to the Macassan people.

The painting is currently housed in storage at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection but is not on display due to its fragile condition. The fragility of the painting lies largely in its "binder lean" condition, particularly concerning the white pigment. Binder is the substance that keeps the paint pigments glued to the bark. "Binder lean" means that a painting lacks an adequate amount of binder, allowing the ochres to flake off easily. The white pigment also has a small particle size which may make it more susceptible to flaking than other colors when it's in an unstable environment. Temperature or humidity fluctuation can cause the bark to expand and shift, causing pigment to flake off. Without conservation and stabilization, it is unlikely that the piece will go on display again.

Mungguraway taught his daughter, Nyapanyapa, how to paint at an early age and told her "When I am gone you will follow behind me and paint too. Show the people – paint and work." Nyapanyapa has continued to paint and became a well-respected artist in her own right. Mungguraway's artistic style and legendary work will always be a part of the Aboriginal community and continue to fascinate generations to come.

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