



Turtles, Crocodiles, and Stars, c. 1968 (date added to collection)

1993.0004.030

Nandjewara Amagula, clan unknown

Andilyaugwa language group, Groote Eylandt

Bark with red, yellow, white, and black ochre

Turtles, Crocodiles, and Stars consists of red, yellow, white and black ochre painted on bark to represent various forms of ancestral beings. The center figure with a star on each of its four points and a bird seated above is believed to represent a constellation. Encased in the constellation are striped turtles and legless lizards. On either side of the constellation a large, anthropomorphic figure kneels with arms outstretched. Both figures contain detailed hatching and dashes that shift to represent the kneeling position as well as bolder designs that are reminiscent of body painting. Beneath the constellation, two crocodiles oppositely faced contain white dashes that give shape to their curved bodies. Beneath the right human figure, a feathered figure is detailed with white tips and dashes that provide texture and dimension. The plain background and relative simplicity are characteristic of Groote Eylandt bark paintings, as well as the broken lines, dot groups, hatching, and cross-hatching. Further, the conceptual topic of constellations is a common theme among such paintings. Uncharacteristically of other bark works, however, the painting is framed with wooden stretchers carefully cut to match its size.

The painting was first purchased by Spence in 1968. It was acquired by Ed Ruhe nearly two and a half decades later in 1993. In 1997 John Kluge acquired the painting from Ruhe's

collection, and it is currently a part of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. The subject of the painting was previously unidentified in Ruhe's notes, however he did note that the figures were human and seated with crossed legs and that the painting contained a "totemic pattern" with animals, stars, and crocodiles. The painting was previously accredited to "Nandjirra".

Research indicates that the constellation may represent the milky way, commonly shown in Groote Eylandt art as a river in the sky containing aquatic species from which the celestial beings feed (Carvana). Other possibilities of constellation representation include the Southern Cross and Pointers, traditionally portrayed as a friendly crocodile and night birds, or the Morning Star, anchored to the Island of Bralku and guarded by two totemic legless lizards (Johnson). Both are associated with death, with Morning Star ceremonies ensuring safe passage of souls to the Land of the Dead. An ancestral being, referred to as Wulumumu, was believed to make feather covered strings from vines from yams that he attached to the Morning Star to guide souls back to their final resting places (Johnson). The feathered figure in the painting is believed to be this string, and the totemic legless lizards are believed to be contained within the constellation.

Nandjewara Amagula, also referred to as Thomas Nandjiwarra, Nandjewara Armagoola, or Najiwarra, was born in 1923 and created numerous paintings, notably in the 1950's, until his death in 1989. Apart from his art, he received the distinction of Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1970, was the chairman of several Aboriginal councils, foundations, and task forces from 1969 to 1985, was the Aboriginal magistrate appointed for the Northern Territory in 1974, and played the role of "Charlie" in the 1997 film, "The Last Wave". Currently his narrative paintings on the seventeen stages of Death on Groote Eylandt are contained in the National Gallery of Australia. Other constellation themed paintings of Nandjewara's, including *The Spirits of the Morning Star Dancing in The Daylight*, *How the Stars were Made*, and *The Creation of the Constellation*, are contained the National Museum of Australia.

The painting was concluded to be the work of Nandjewara instead of "Nandjirra" and was confirmed through comparative study of Nandjewara's other works, which contained striking similarity to *Crocodiles, Turtles, and Stars*. The exact date of the creation of the painting is still unknown, although it is presumed to be from the early 1960's due to the relative dates of Nandjewara's similar works.

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