

CHAPTER 20  
**Aesthete and Scholar**  
 Two Complementary Influences on the Kluge–Ruhe  
 Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of  
 Virginia  
*Margo Smith*

The Kluge–Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia is the only public museum devoted entirely to Australian Aboriginal art in America. Comprising over 1600 objects (see Table 20.1), including paintings on bark, canvas, board and paper (see Figure 20.1), plus sculpture, ceremonial objects, regalia and tools (see Figure 20.2), the collection possesses extraordinary depth and breadth, representing a wide range of Aboriginal art produced over time. It may seem strange that an Australian Aboriginal art collection of its size and quality would be found in central Virginia. Yet for many Americans who visit the collection, it is their only opportunity to learn about Australia's Indigenous people. This unique collection is the creation of two Americans whose circumstances and collecting habits represent very different orientations to Aboriginal art.

Professor Edward L Ruhe was an academic whose pursuit of Aboriginal art became a scholarly exercise. Ruhe's research encompassed everything that related to Aboriginal art and culture. His archives include published materials of all kinds—books, pamphlets,

Table 20.1 Contents of the Kluge–Ruhe Collection of the University of Virginia

Paintings (total)		893	
	Bark	525	
	Canvas	272	
	Paper	61	
	Other	35	
Artefacts (total)		718	
	Carvings	196	174 small carvings under 50 cms., 15 over 100 cms., most painted with ochre and some containing hairstring, feathers, resin, etc.
	Log coffins	28	Ranging from 66 cm. to 250 cm. and painted with ochre.
	Musical instruments	28	14 sets of clap stick and 14 didjeridus made of wood, many painted with ochre.
	Restricted ceremonial objects	50	24 tjuringa and 12 bullroarers, made of wood or stone with hairstring and ochre
	Body ornaments	59	15 headdresses, 12 feather pins, 10 necklaces, 8 skirts, 7 armlets, 4 string belts, etc., made of plant fibre or hairstring with feather and clay decorations and ochre.
	Spears and spear throwers	135	Up to 280 cm. made of wood or bamboo with resin, plant fibre, rock or metal tip, and ochre.
	Tools	115	33 boomerangs, 24 clubs, 17 containers, 9 digging sticks, 9 shields, 9 axes, 6 knives, 4 firesticks, etc., made of wood, fibre, stone, many of which painted with ochre.
	Woven objects	31	14 dilly bags, 7 baskets, 5 mats, 3 fish traps, 2 nets, made of plant fibre.
	Other	76	Pipes, message sticks, fans, toys, canoe, painted rock
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1611</b>	



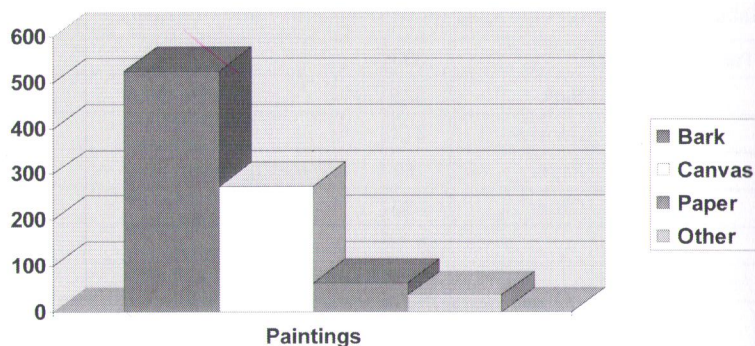


Figure 20.1: Paintings in the Kluge-Ruhe Collection

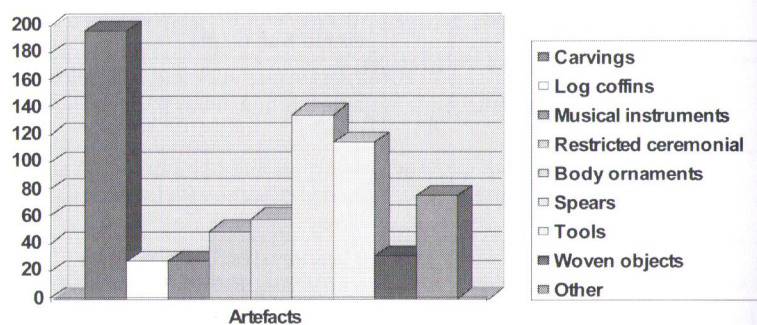


Figure 20.2: Artefacts in the Kluge-Ruhe Collection

exhibition catalogues and recordings, correspondence over twenty-four years with many experts on the subject of Aboriginal art, and his own notes, manuscripts and catalogues, including an exhaustive index of bark artists. Ruhe entered the Aboriginal art world at a time when collections were viewed primarily for their ethnographic value. He envisioned Aboriginal art as fine art and promoted this idea tirelessly through exhibitions and catalogues. Although limited by his resources, Ruhe built the collection through his relationships with people with access to and knowledge about Aboriginal art. He loved his collection but also happily parted with individual pieces, keeping his focus on studying the art and the artists rather than the collection.

John W Kluge is a collector who appreciates the aesthetic properties and visual power of Aboriginal art. He was attracted to

Aboriginal art at a time when it was emerging in the global art market. Like Ed Ruhe, Kluge saw, in Aboriginal art, a form that had not yet realised its potential. Kluge admits he enjoyed taking risks as a collector. 'It wasn't safe art,' he says, 'that was part of the attraction'.<sup>1</sup> He brought enormous resources into the development of a world-class collection, organising huge commissions with Aboriginal art centres, purchasing one-off items like a large painted rock, and outbidding other collectors and institutions for the Ruhe collection following Ed Ruhe's death. Aboriginal paintings graced the walls of his homes in Virginia, New York and Florida. The Kluge collection remained private for many years, although he installed some early western desert pieces in a restaurant he owned in Manhattan and loaned other works to the Art Museum of Western Virginia for a travelling exhibition. During this time Kluge explored the possibility of building a private museum for the collection. In the end, he was convinced that the research value of the collection should be utilised and he donated the Kluge-Ruhe Collection to the University of Virginia.

As the aesthete and the scholar, Kluge and Ruhe expressed their passion for Aboriginal art in different ways. Their combined stories mirror the history of Aboriginal art and its recognition as an international art form.

### The Creation of the Ruhe Collection

Edward Lehman Ruhe was born in 1923 in Allentown, Pennsylvania. His father was the editor of the Allentown newspaper, *The Morning Call*. His mother was a suffragette who raised a number of children in addition to her own. The seventh of nine siblings, Ruhe's academic pursuits earned him the affectionate nickname of 'Hatte racque' or 'Hat' from members of his family who thought he might get a 'big head'. Family members think of Ruhe as a collector from an early age. Among his childhood collections were World War I artefacts, a baseball signed by the 1928 New York Yankees, including Babe Ruth, plus arrowheads and other found objects. He arranged this eclectic collection at the family farm outside of Allentown, inviting visitors to enter his museum, where he would discuss the significance of each item. Ruhe loved books and music, theatre, movies and all manner of learning. He received his undergraduate degree in English literature



from Swarthmore College and went on to Columbia University for his master's and doctoral degrees. He taught at Rutgers and Cornell before accepting a position at the University of Kansas in Lawrence in 1958. Ruhe remained there as a Professor of English Literature until his death from a heart attack in 1989.

From March to December 1965, Ruhe visited Australia as a Fulbright scholar, largely through the urging of Brian Elliot, a former colleague at Cornell who had returned to the University of Adelaide. Ruhe had no substantive knowledge of Aboriginal art prior to that trip. In Adelaide, he joined the Anthropological Society of South Australia, where he rubbed shoulders with Charles Mountford, Norman Tindale, Robert Edwards and others who were deeply involved in Aboriginal studies. Ruhe's scrapbook from the period, a jumble of letters, newspaper clippings, theatre programs, photographs and notes jotted in the margins, contains some hints of his budding interest in Aboriginal people and their art. A diary entry from 8 March bears a clipping about Donald Thomson's encounters with Bindibu people still living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle in the western desert. A few days later, the first reference to bark paintings appears in the form of drawings of motifs copied out of Herbert Basedow's *The Australian Aboriginal*. Ruhe frequented a shop in Adelaide that carried bark paintings and became attached to a painting of two crocodiles by Daynganggan, his first bark purchase.

During a mid-term break in May of 1965, Ruhe took a three-week excursion to Alice Springs and Darwin with members of the Anthropological Society of South Australia, including Robert Edwards, then curator of anthropology at the South Australia Museum. Ruhe purchased several Aboriginal paintings and artefacts, commenting on 20 May: 'The Arunta [Arrernte] bullroarers nabbed by Edwards. I got one. Late'.<sup>2</sup> It was on this trip that Ruhe met and befriended Geoffrey Spence, a retired civil engineer whose private collection of Aboriginal art was exhibited in a municipal building within the Botanical Gardens in Darwin. Ruhe spent every day in Darwin at Spence's museum, making a return trip in November before leaving Australia.

One other stop on Ruhe's journey was the Aboriginal community of Maningrida in central Arnhem Land, where he purchased bark paintings by Bilinyarra, Jarabili and Ruriya. After returning to Adelaide, Ruhe continued to collect paintings 'at a rate of about one a

week'.<sup>3</sup> Most of the barks came from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Rex Battarbee's shop in Adelaide. He also bought several bark paintings from the Church Missionary Society in Sydney and assorted gift shops in Victoria and Queensland. During his Fulbright year, Ruhe collected approximately fifty bark paintings and seventy artefacts.

Ruhe forged many contacts with people who were in a position to supply him with new acquisitions. After returning to Lawrence, he corresponded regularly with Jim Davidson and the staff at the art centre in Maningrida. Quite unexpectedly, he received an urgent telegram from Geoff Spence on 2 March 1966 with this cryptic message: 'Museum closing offering nine tenths contents ten and half thousand American or selected half contents six and half'.<sup>4</sup> A letter followed explaining that Spence and his wife had arranged to buy a home in Byron Bay, NSW and needed to sell the collection in order to complete the purchase. Spence had envisioned the Northern Territory Administration buying his collection for the newly legislated Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery. But after a 'blazing row' with Administrator Harry Giese, he arranged to have the collection sold at a commercial gallery in Sydney. The letter to Ruhe indicated that Spence wanted the collection to remain intact and was looking for a buyer, either in Australia or abroad, to purchase half of the collection or even the lot.<sup>5</sup>

Despite his limited salary as a university professor, Ruhe undertook to purchase half of the Spence collection, comprising approximately 130 paintings and over 350 artefacts, and quickly located an investor to put up part of the money. Ruhe described Dr Ronald Reivich to Geoff Spence as 'a good friend, M.D., art-fancier and psychiatrist, anxious to share the collection for study purposes and not interested in resale'.<sup>6</sup> With a partner on board, Ruhe proceeded with the purchase, exchanging voluminous correspondence with Spence about the contents of the sale, export requirements and Ruhe's intentions for the art.

That the Spence Collection left Australia at this time is probably due more to the personalities involved than to the general climate regarding Aboriginal art. The Northern Territory Administration had appointed a Museum Board in 1964 and had begun acquiring Aboriginal art. Spence told Ruhe that he offered his entire collection 'walk-in, walk-out' to the Administration for £5000. The NT



Administrator brought Fred McCarthy from Canberra to inspect and evaluate the collection. Annoyed at the choice, Spence wrote, '[McCarthy] hadn't bought any material since he accompanied the Australian-American Expedition some fifteen years or so before'. Although Spence was never told the total valuation, he learned that the inspectors advised the Administration that 'they could make a similar collection much more cheaply'. Spence concludes, 'I feel that the matter was dealt with as a personal one and not something involving the community's benefit or otherwise'.<sup>7</sup>

The decision engendered some controversy. Spence reported that *The Territorian* was preparing an article 'on "Museums in Darwin and How to Lose Them" especially designed to irritate Harry Giese [Director of Social Welfare 1954–70] and Roger Dean [NT Administrator 1964–70]'.<sup>8</sup> Bob Edwards wrote to Ruhe, 'I was sorry to hear the Darwin collection went out of Australia. It was far too valuable to be lost to this country. I heard all about the offer to the Welfare Department and Mr. McCarthy's inspection and report while I was in Darwin last year. Anyway it went to the right chap in the end as I realize you will appreciate its real value'.<sup>9</sup>

At that time, the Welfare Branch issued exportation licenses for Aboriginal art. Spence did not anticipate any problems, saying, 'I feel the only thing the Northern Territory Administration wants of the museum is to see it travel far enough for them to have no need to think of it ever again'.<sup>10</sup> Everything eventually passed inspection, with the exception of a few objects. Spence told Ruhe that he left those objects to the University of Kansas in his will with explicit instruction for his heirs to burn them if they were deemed unexportable. He wrote, 'Pure blackmail I know but I'm not fond of government interference with me ... I've set it out that way because I think that even a customs officer would rather have them go abroad than be burnt'.<sup>11</sup>

At his end, Ruhe encountered major difficulty with the U.S. Customs Office, which failed to recognise the collection as 'art' and imposed import duties on the shipment. Ruhe included the following explanations, clarifying his intentions regarding the collection, in his application for a tax waiver:

We are concerned to photograph, catalogue, and make available information about the collection ... to arrange

exhibitions of selected materials from the collection for use by interested museums, universities and other institutions, and to contribute as much as possible to the serious study of Australian (particularly Arnhem Land Art), which we judge to be the most beautiful, valuable and significant primitive art produced in the world today. We are concerned further to maintain the integrity of the Spence collection as far as possible, hoping eventually to find a responsible institution which will be glad to accept it and we hope exhibit it on the best terms.

We have purchased the collection, then, in the same spirit in which it was assembled—as a collection of art objects for study and public exhibition. It is, incidentally, a collection of museum quality, each piece having been subjected to some study establishing its character, provenance and authorship. While it has substantial ethnological value, the motives of Mr. Spence and of ourselves in acquiring it might perhaps be acceptable in determining its character as primarily that of an art collection.<sup>12</sup>

While still finalising the details of the Spence purchase, Ruhe arranged to buy twenty bark paintings from Jim Davidson with the help of Dr Reivich. These paintings were collected directly from the artists by Davidson and accompanied by documentation. Through his own research, Ruhe determined that Spence's documentation was frequently inaccurate. Davidson explained, 'Geoff has been handicapped by not having any direct contact with the artists and has to depend entirely on information supplied by the Mission'.<sup>13</sup> 'I used to set him right with ascriptions during my visits to the museum'.<sup>14</sup> Davidson made frequent trips to Arnhem Land to secure bark paintings and objects for museums and private clients. On numerous occasions, he showed photographs of works from Ruhe's collection to artists to clear up questionable attributions and documentation errors.

In 1968 Spence contacted Ruhe again offering to sell the remaining barks and artefacts in his collection. This time he needed money to settle his wife's medical bills. As both he and Reivich were



still paying for Spence I, Ruhe looked for another investor to assist with the purchase of Spence II. He wrote to Spence about his new partner, George Gill, 'a doctor in western Kansas, father of two of my students and enthusiastic about art. He wants to help—says he thinks the art is a likely investment, and he would like to have a few for his collection; beyond that, he ... proposes to leave all the new batch in my possession as long as necessary for full study. This is a dream'.<sup>15</sup>

What Ruhe didn't know was that Spence had offered the collection to several other parties, including Louis Allen of Palo Alto, California. Ruhe heard about it from Davidson, who had been contacted by more than one person to evaluate the collection. Firing an angry letter to Spence, Ruhe asked him whether he was dealing in good faith. Spence replied that while he offered the collection to Allen at US\$7500, he was content selling it to Ruhe for US\$6000 as he wanted the collection to remain more or less intact.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, Ruhe worked out his own deal with Allen, allowing him fifteen bark paintings and an assortment of objects for a partial investment in the purchase price. When Spence II was divided up between Ruhe, Gill and Allen, Ruhe added another forty-six bark paintings and 160 artefacts to his already vast collection.

Ed Ruhe's collection, which had now grown to several hundred bark paintings and objects, took over his modest apartment above a movie house in downtown Lawrence. One of his students described the proliferation of bark paintings as follows:

They were leaning against the walls. They were on tables. They were stacked in piles under the beds. ('Women should not go in this room,' Ed would say. 'There are spirit objects at rest here that will be disturbed by women.') They were on the piano and in the closets, and tucked behind the mirrors that hid the Murphy bed. They were piled on bookshelves ... Ed went blithely on, buying more bark paintings and Australian artefacts.<sup>17</sup>

The presence of Aboriginal art in Ed Ruhe's life touched everyone who knew him. Ruhe tirelessly promoted the art at the University of Kansas, mounting exhibitions and hosting lectures by Norman

Tindale and Rev. Edgar Wells, and a four-day visit by Aboriginal leader Wandjuk Marika, accompanied by Robert Yunupingu and Stan Roache. For Marika's visit, Ruhe developed an exhibit called *The Artists of Yirrkala* at the University of Kansas Union. Marika and Yunupingu demonstrated bark painting in the gallery and performed northeastern Arnhem Land dances accompanied by the didjeridu for a crowd of over 300 people.

Ruhe wanted to see Aboriginal art exhibited on an equal footing with Western art, an idea slowly gaining momentum in Australia at that time. While still in Australia, he arranged for an exhibition of bark art from his collection at the University of Kansas Museum of Art. The exhibition, *Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land*, featured work from Maningrida, Milingimbi, Yirrkala, Groote Eylandt, Rose River Mission, Port Keats and Queensland. Between 1966 and 1977, he organised twenty exhibitions at art museums and commercial galleries from Seattle, Washington to Washington, DC, often covering

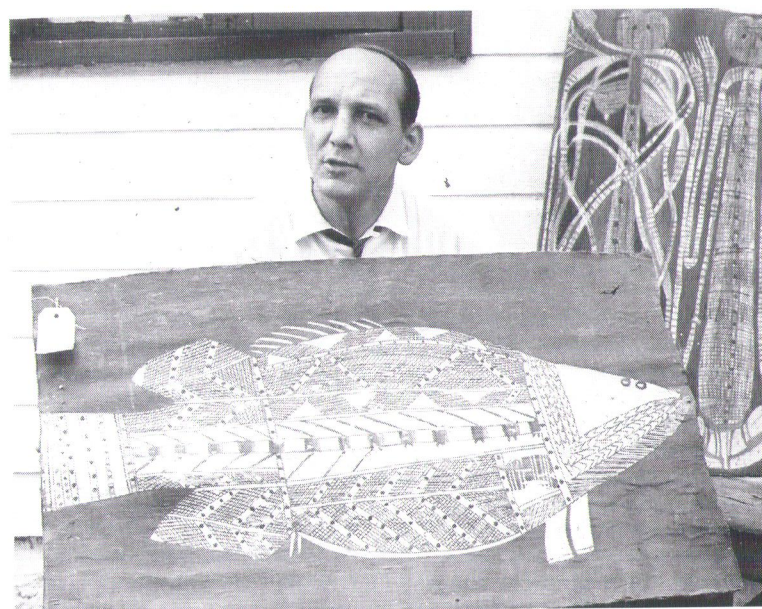


Plate 20.1: Ed Ruhe holding Yirawala bark upon receipt of Spence Collection, 1966

SOURCE: RUHE ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, CHARLOTTESVILLE



the costs himself. Works were sold at some of the exhibitions to recover expenses. In 1976, Ruhe contracted with the International Exhibitions Foundation to tour the work for one year. In 1977, he decided to stop touring the work when he realised some of the pieces had been damaged through improper handling and packing. Aboriginal art exhibitions remained an important research interest, however, and Ruhe kept a detailed file of every exhibition he learned about.

Beginning in 1965, Ruhe corresponded widely with people who were conducting research on Aboriginal art and culture, including anthropologists Frederick Rose, Ronald Berndt and Karel Kupka, linguists Buelah Lowe and Bernhard Shubeck, missionaries Edgar Wells and Wilbur Chaseling, and collectors such as Jim Davidson and Louis Allen. From the start it was clear that he had settled on an area of study that engaged him totally—as a researcher, a writer, an art critic, a student of human behaviour and, of course, as a collector. His first research paper on Aboriginal art, entitled *Bark Artists of Arnhem Land*, was delivered at the Anthropological Society of South Australia on 15 November 1965. For over a year, the South Australia Museum discussed publishing the paper as a monograph. Charles Mountford objected, although his specific argument with Ruhe was unclear. Jim Davidson wrote, ‘I would love to see it published. I thoroughly agree with what you have written. How the hell M. can take offence is beyond me but certainly not unexpected’.<sup>18</sup> Despite widespread support among anthropologists at the South Australia Museum and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, the project was abandoned.

Some of Ruhe’s initial research interests followed him through his life. He was always concerned with the attribution of works to individual artists. Correspondence from October of 1965 indicates that Ruhe attempted to obtain lists of works and their artists from major museums throughout Australia. The responses he received confirmed that most museums were unable to supply this information. A very typical response, from then Director of the National Museum of Victoria, John McNally, offered lists of bark paintings, drawings, descriptions and subjects, but concluded, ‘I regret to say, however, that I cannot provide you with the name of the artist in any instance’.<sup>19</sup> The scarcity of information on Aboriginal artists in major institutions and collections encouraged Ruhe to pursue this area of study.

Ruhe developed quite involved professional and personal relationships with several people, particularly Reverend Edgar Wells and Jim Davidson. Ruhe’s main correspondence with Wells revolved around bark paintings and objects, artist identifications and recollections of mission history and the movements of Aboriginal people in central and eastern Arnhem Land. Jim Davidson had rated Wells as the best expert on Aboriginal art in a letter from 1966:

Edgar Wells I would put No. 1. Berndt No 2—but suspect on many matters. Elkins good as far as he goes but is limited. Mountford unscientific and hopelessly inaccurate on bark paintings, very good in other fields. I only place myself after Wells, by virtue of my close and regular contact with the artists.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, Ruhe relied on Wells to answer voluminous questions on artists, particularly concerning the attribution of works.

Because he focused on the artist as an individual, Ruhe wanted to know everything he could about each artist. The Ruhe archives include lists of clans and sub-clans, artists’ dates and places of birth, country and manner of death. He recorded the themes painted by artists and the symbolism they used. Whenever he could, Ruhe swapped anecdotal information about individuals. Davidson’s correspondence is filled with descriptions of artists and events taking place in communities during his visits. The desire to meet and work with artists face-to-face took Ruhe back to Australia in 1972, where he organised a two-month volunteer stint at Milingimbi Mission to assist in the art centre. During this visit, Ruhe interacted with many of the artists whom he considered to be the master painters of Arnhem Land, their work already represented in his collection in Kansas. In an interview in 1985, Ruhe told former student Evan Tonsing about his encounters with such artists:

Two or three aboriginals asked me quite urgently, ‘What are you doing here?’ I said, ‘who, me?’ They said, ‘No, all you white people. What do you want out of us?’ That mission had been founded in 1923. In a space of 50 ... 49 years, those people had not understood what white people thought they were doing living in Milingimbi ...



When Djawa, the head man, who was an admirable and distinctly famous man in Australia, when he asked me the question, I was perplexed. I said, 'Oh, Djawa, I must explain. I knew you in a way before I came to this mission. I saw your paintings. I saw your paintings in London, I saw your paintings in Paris, I saw your paintings in books, I saw them in Sydney. I have one of your paintings, Djawa. I think it's lovely.' I said, 'The man who painted those paintings is a great man. I want to meet that man.' ... I said it and I meant it ... then Djawa looked at me earnestly and he whistled.<sup>21</sup>

Ruhe collected both film footage and still photographs in Milngimbi. Some of the footage, which was later transferred to videotape, shows five artists painting in a grove of trees. Ruhe's notes identify the 'atelier of artists' as 'Burrungurr' (painting five Julungul in log), 'Boyun' (lily, snake, diver bird), 'Malangi' (two fish), 'Binyinyiwuy' (lizard and totem object) and 'Bonguwoi' (wurrpan and murayana, emu and ancestor spearing).<sup>22</sup>

Following his visit to Milngimbi, he developed a card catalogue of known bark painters in the community, including

men of good or high ceremonial standing well represented in museum collections and exhibitions and in most cases, quite unnoticed, in the ordinary craft sales of the missions. (The catalogue) includes all artists collected at Milngimbi by Dr. Groger-Wurm in 1967, nearly all the artists of the area identified by Karel Kupka in his unpublished dissertation ... and all of the bark painters I was aware of during my own visit in 1972.<sup>23</sup>

Each card had the artist's name and alternate spellings of the name on the top line. Directly across from that were the artist's language group and clan affiliations (mata and mala) and date of birth if known. Notes usually described the artist's family members, followed by his or her domicile, with census information cited, and any anecdotal information Ruhe had collected. He used his own system of abbreviations to note any references and exhibitions relating to the artist with page and plate numbers identified—for example, 'Groger-Wurm, I, 216, 232'.



Plate 20.2: Ed Ruhe at Masterpieces of Australian Bark Painting exhibition, SUNY, Albany, NY, 1973

SOURCE: RUHE ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, CHARLOTTESVILLE

Several people assisted with the Milngimbi catalogue. Beulah Lowe provided Ruhe with a list of names of bark painters using phonetic script, indicating their clans and dates of birth. One copy of the catalogue is marked up with corrections from Edgar Wells. It isn't clear when Ruhe expanded this project to include all of the bark artists in northern Australia. Over 500 artists are represented in his index, with the greatest concentration in central and northeastern Arnhem Land.

Ed Ruhe was constantly thinking about ways to write up his research and had many writing projects in various stages of completion. Somewhere between formulating the idea, checking with other scholars, creating an outline, taking voluminous notes and actually committing paragraphs to paper, Ruhe seemed to lose momentum. His writings are riddled with corrections. He was an obsessive fact-checker and would send the same set of questions to different experts for their opinions, often receiving conflicting answers. Perhaps the lack of agreement among scholars prompted him to propose a *Handbook of Bark Painting*, the focus of which was to record and standardise knowledge about bark art. Ruhe outlined chapters on the history of bark art, an analysis of excellence in bark painting, a description of local styles and biographical information on known bark painters. In later years, Ruhe started a manuscript on the bark art of Milngimbi, roughly following the outline for the handbook.



Ruhe worked on two other projects for publication but only one made it into print. 'Bark Art of Tasmania' was included in *Art and Identity in Oceania*, a volume edited by Ruhe's colleagues at the University of Kansas, Alan and Louise Hanson. 'Two Neglected Australian Bark Paintings', an examination of early bark paintings in the British Museum, was near completion when Ruhe passed away. Although Ruhe never completed his major projects, the archival information he collected has proved a valuable primary resource for researchers on Aboriginal art.

In 1971, Ed Ruhe donated seven bark paintings to the Museum of Art at the University of Kansas. Six of the paintings were in a series by Kunwinjku artist 'Balilbalil', depicting a mortuary ceremony. The seventh was *The Story of Djirit* by Nanyin Maymuru from Yirrkala. All had been illustrated in *Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land*, which had been exhibited at the museum in 1966. Shortly after the gift, the bark paintings were quietly deaccessioned and transferred to the Museum of Anthropology. Ruhe was incensed that these pieces were not recognised as fine art, a point he had explicitly championed throughout his involvement with Aboriginal art. He shot off numerous letters, insisting that the paintings be returned to the art museum. The painting by Nanyin was returned to the Museum of Art but it was later deaccessioned and ended up once again in the Museum of Anthropology.

While Ruhe grew attached to some individual pieces, he frequently gave bark paintings to friends and sold paintings at exhibitions. From the mid-1980s, he began thinking about selling the collection to a public institution. By 1987, Ruhe had offered the collection to both the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) and the National Museum of Australia (NMA) for \$1 million. When he passed away suddenly in 1989, however, Ruhe had not made any arrangements for the collection. Remarkably, it was Ed Ruhe's obituary that brought his collection to the attention of American businessman John W Kluge. Because the newspaper business was such a part of their lives, Ben Ruhe wanted his brother's obituary to appear in *The New York Times*. When he contacted the newspaper, he spoke with a junior reporter who, as luck would have it, had attended Swarthmore, Ruhe's alma mater. Ruhe's obituary mentioned his collection, exhibitions and research. A friend passed the obituary on to Kluge, who

eventually purchased the Ruhe collection, incorporating it into his own impressive Aboriginal art collection.

### The Creation of the Kluge-Ruhe Collection

The Kluge collection was built at a time when the Aboriginal art market was booming both in Australia and abroad. Exhibitions in New York, Dusseldorf and Paris fuelled the explosion of international interest. An article appearing in *The New York Times* in May 1989 announced that 'having proved highly saleable in Australia, the [Aboriginal art] craze is reaching Europe and the United States'.<sup>24</sup> John Kluge was mentioned among a list of notable people who were scooping up the art, including Mick Jagger, Wim Wenders, the Queen of Denmark and Yoko Ono. One of the three wealthiest men in America, Kluge poured considerable financial resources into his collection, contributing to the perceived boom.

John Werner Kluge was born in Chemnitz, Germany in 1914. His father was killed early in World War I and he emigrated to America with his mother and German-American stepfather when he was eight years old. Kluge excelled in school and was awarded a four-year honour scholarship to Columbia University. He 'worked' his way through college by playing poker and landed his first full-time job by offering to work for a very low salary on the condition that his employer give him a share of the company if he could double their sales. Beginning in the stockroom, Kluge set out to learn every job in the company. Within three years he had doubled sales, was vice president and owned a third of the company's stock.<sup>25</sup> Kluge's work history is characterised by risk taking and relentless ambition. He invested in several different industries, including radio stations, food brokerage, direct mail and real estate. In each case, he found new ways to promote a stagnant company or industry and turned a floundering concern into a flourishing business. By 1958, Kluge was a millionaire. He built his present company, Metromedia Incorporated, into a huge conglomerate of advertising, entertainment and communications businesses. In the 1980s, Kluge organised a leveraged buyout of Metromedia, turning millions into billions within a few years.

Kluge's drive to achieve higher and higher goals is evident not only in his work history but also in his collecting habits. He began



collecting art in the 1950s and became a leading proponent of corporate art investment. Speaking at an Art and Industry Seminar at Millikin University in 1960, Kluge said:

society's welfare and that of business are invariably bound up. Who is to say ... what will last beyond today, what will most surely carry forward the human story—new techniques for stamping out tubes, a new kitchen gadget, a new chemical formula for producing synthetic yarn, or a new thought, a line of poetry, a bar of music, an oil painting that catches the sun on a face full of freckles ... A thing of Art, which is a beauty forever, is so because it contains the human element.<sup>26</sup>

Through Metromedia, Kluge purchased the work of emerging Californian artists and a historic poster collection. By the time he started collecting Australian Aboriginal art, Kluge already owned collections of ancient bronze sculptures and nineteenth-century horse-drawn carriages. His residences in New York and Virginia were filled with an eclectic mix of antiquities, modern and contemporary art, sculpture and fine furnishings. Aboriginal art complemented this extraordinary blend of cultures and styles.

Kluge first became interested in Aboriginal art when the *Dreamings* exhibition was shown at the Asia Society Galleries in New York in October 1988. Experiencing a powerful visual attraction to the art and believing it might prove a worthwhile investment, Kluge decided to begin collecting in this area. Maurice Tuchman, then Curator of European Paintings at the Los Angeles County Museum, acted as Kluge's agent on significant art purchases. He accompanied Kluge to Australia in December 1988 to learn more about Aboriginal art and purchase works for the collection. In addition to selecting works from galleries in Alice Springs and Darwin, Kluge visited Bulabula Arts at Ramingining, where Djon Mundine was working as the art advisor. With little in stock, Mundine suggested a major commission representing the major clans and styles of painting in central Arnhem Land. Mundine describes undertaking the Kluge commission:

What followed was a period of delicious art production that delighted, moved and stunned me ... The commission came to include the last paintings of the important artist Paddy Dhatangu. It inspired Micky Dorrng to create the first bold red, yellow, and white striped Djang'kawu painting. Until that time in 1990 this body design had only appear[ed] on three-dimensional objects and never as this stark, flat, abstract pattern.<sup>27</sup>

Commissions, like this one, can exert a powerful influence over art production. Ramingining experienced a renaissance of painting as artists viewed one another's work and were compelled to produce bigger and better pieces. Mundine writes:

to begin with the artists remained very tentative, only coming up with minor paintings until Andrew Margululu completed his large *Ngalkandjibimirri* (frilled lizard) painting on bark. Over two metres high and a metre wide, this painting took pride of place in the art centre. Although I was not demanding that everyone come up with such huge works, it gave the artists a standard to work towards.<sup>28</sup>

In 1991, Kluge commissioned a set of Kunwinjku paintings on Arches paper from Injalak Arts at Oenpelli/Gunbalanya under the direction of Felicity Wright. The stippled backgrounds of the paintings, embellished with hand stencils, evoked the rock faces of the Arnhem Land escarpment, while the high-quality paper allowed incredible detail and precision. Artists depicted characters in complex frieze-like arrangements. These magnificent paintings marked a shift from bark to paper that has continued in Gunbalanya to the present.

With the Ramingining commission underway, Kluge continued to purchase works from galleries in New York City, Los Angeles, Melbourne and Adelaide. Through the 1990s, he accumulated early western desert paintings from the collection of Margaret Carnegie, Tiwi sculptures and artefacts collected by Dorothy Bennett, and early bark paintings commissioned by Mountford in 1948, which had been in the collection of Australian artist Ainslie Roberts. The purchase of



the Ruhe collection was finalised in 1993, making Kluge's collection the largest in private hands outside Australia.

Kluge's primary motivation was to build a comprehensive and 'complete' collection of Aboriginal art. In the beginning, Kluge relied on the advice of others, such as Tuchman, Mundine and Wright, to set the collection's focus. At that time there were no guidelines for building the collection. Tuchman had worked closely with one or two art dealers, selecting pieces from whatever was offered without a specified collection strategy. In 1995, Kluge hired Howard Morphy as an adviser. As a graduate student in anthropology recently returned from fieldwork in central Australia, I came aboard to catalogue the collection and eventually became its full-time curator. Morphy suggested working directly with Aboriginal art centres to fill gaps in the collection and to build on the collection's strengths rather than branching out to areas unrepresented in the collection. As a result, four areas were identified for future acquisitions: Yirrkala, Maningrida, Yuendumu and Balgo. In 1996–97, commissions were arranged with

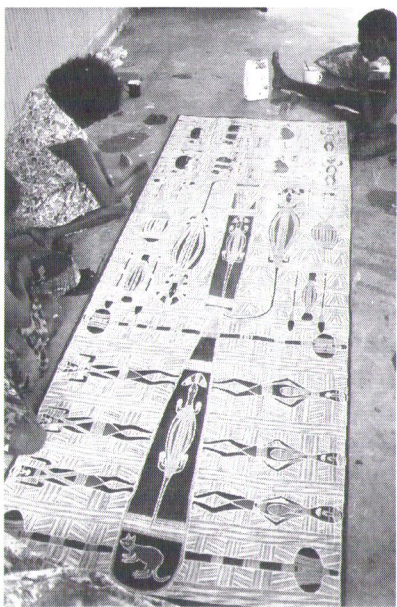


Plate 20.3: Wolpa Wanambi completing bark painting for Kluge commission, Yirrkala, 1996

PHOTOGRAPH: BUKU LARRNGAY ARTS

these art centres, producing collections of contemporary art representing the major artists and themes from each area. Morphy and I visited the communities in 1996 to select and document commissioned works.

The Yirrkala commission yielded a set of thirty-five monumental bark paintings and one log coffin of exceptional quality. Fourteen of the works were entered into the 1996 Telstra National Aboriginal Art Awards in Darwin. Djambawa Marawili's painting *Mardarrpa miny'tji* won first prize in the bark category. This large set of barks was only the third such commission produced in Yirrkala and the only one in private hands.

The Maningrida art centre agreed to reserve paintings of exceptional quality for the Kluge collection. Approximately sixty paintings and sculptures were selected in 1996 and 1997. This selection included works by artists previously unrepresented in the Kluge collection, and recently deceased artists whose work was being held for museums.

Works from Balgo were initially obtained through auction and purchases at Warlayirti Artists. In 1997, Kluge financed a commission facilitated by Christine Watson, an anthropologist who had conducted fieldwork with artists from the region. The commission focused on artists from minority linguistic groups in the communities surrounding Balgo: Malun, Yaka Yaka and Billiluna.

The final commission yielded a giant canvas and several small auxiliary canvases by Warlukurlangu Artists in Yuendumu. This project involved the collaboration of over thirty artists. To prepare for the project, Warlukurlangu organised a bush trip to the site that was chosen as the subject of the painting, a hill with a red-ochre deposit called Karrku. During the bush trip, dancers enacted the activities of ancestral beings while singers described their exploits. Returning to Yuendumu with the stories and songs relating to *Karrku* fresh in their minds, the artists began painting in the art centre. The final painting, which measures 3 metre by 7 metres, is one of a few large collaborative commissions that were produced for public galleries.

Kluge resisted many opportunities to exhibit or publicise the collection in order to maintain his privacy. Although he did not share Ruhe's scholarly interest in the collection, Kluge understood its research value. At Morphy's suggestion he allowed scholars to study





Plate 20.4: Pansy Nakamarra Stewart painting large Karrku canvas for Kluge commission, Yuendumu, 1996  
PHOTOGRAPH: WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS

and write about it in *Art From the Land: Dialogues with the Kluge–Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art*, and hosted a symposium in October 1997 where contributors presented their papers and exchanged ideas. The resulting catalogue was published in 1999.

For many years, Kluge considered building a private museum for the Aboriginal art collection, similar to the carriage museum he developed at Morven, his farm near Charlottesville, Virginia. Indeed, the size of the later commissions demanded a large building on the scale of a museum. At one point, he decided not to build the museum and turned his attention towards finding a permanent home for the collection. Kluge felt the collection would be best used at a university where it would be available for exhibition as well as scholarly research and study. In December 1997, the University of Virginia accepted the gift of the Kluge–Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, so named by John Kluge to reflect the complementary influences of both collectors. The Kluge–Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection opened a museum and study centre in 1999. Although Kluge kept approximately 150 Aboriginal art pieces, which were hanging in his various residences at the time of the gift, the entire Ruhe collection, archives and library went to the University of Virginia.



Plate 20.5: John Kluge and UVA president John Casteen at the opening of the Kluge–Ruhe Collection, University of Virginia, 1999  
PHOTOGRAPH: MARGO SMITH

### Conclusion

As collectors, Ruhe and Kluge appear to embody opposing motivations and values. Yet they shared a passion for Aboriginal art as an art form equal to any other in the world. Ruhe recognised the aesthetic qualities of Aboriginal art at a time when many others regarded it as material culture. His insistence that Aboriginal artists who had mastered their craft were the counterparts of acclaimed European artists, such as Picasso and Matisse, was realised in the late 1980s when Kluge began collecting Aboriginal art. Ruhe's promotion of Aboriginal art anticipated a day when a collector like Kluge, whose primary response to the art was aesthetic, would not only collect fine Aboriginal art but also contribute to the creation of a global Aboriginal art market.

Ed Ruhe believed that his visit to Milingimbi galvanised artists. In a letter to his brother, Ruhe wrote, 'at least eight artists of skill and power have been painting abundantly for the past two weeks'.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Kluge's investment in Aboriginal art, particularly through commissions organised through community art centres, motivated artists to produce high-quality works. One wonders if their being American had any impact on the artists, if for no other reason, to emphasise the appeal of Aboriginal art around the world.

With many comparable collections in Australia, this is perhaps the unique thing that the Kluge–Ruhe Collection offers. Because it is



in America, the Kluge–Ruhe Collection is accessible to many people who may never have the opportunity to visit Australia. And like collections of Chinese or Roman or African art found in institutions throughout the world, the Kluge–Ruhe Collection demonstrates the global significance of Australian Aboriginal art.

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