WITH HER HANDS: Women’s Fiber Art from Gapuwiyak

The Louise Hamby Gift
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exhibition curated by
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DIRECTOR’S FORWARD

The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection is profoundly grateful to Dr. Louise Hamby for the gift of 100 fiber artworks from Gapuwiyak, a Yolŋu community in Australia’s Northern Territory. As an anthropologist specializing in the material culture of Arnhem Land, Louise has visited Kluge-Ruhe many times to conduct research. She knew that a significant donation of fiber artworks would enable Kluge-Ruhe to tell a fuller story about contemporary Aboriginal women artists, as we have done in the exhibition *With Her Hands: Women’s Fiber Work from Gapuwiyak*.

The Louise Hamby gift is extraordinary, not only for the number of artists represented and the fine quality of artworks it contains, but also for its extensive research potential. In her careful selection of objects, Louise considered many elements that become apparent only after intensive study, such as the different types of fiber objects, colors and materials, uses, and traditional and innovative practices that make up the Yolŋu world of fiber art.

*With Her Hands* was curated by six undergraduate students as part of the Mellon Summer Curatorial Research Project at UVA. The six young women, Barriane Franks, Antionette Griffin, Hannah Jeffries, Helen Martinez, Diana Proenza and Victoria Morales Rodriguez, benefitted from the mentorship of Louise, as well as the master fiber artist Lucy Waṉapuyŋu and emerging artist Anna Ramatha Malibirr from Gapuwiyak. We have all learned so much by bringing these three experts to the University of Virginia and involving them in the curation of the exhibition. They have brought incredible depth to our understanding of the process of making fiber works and the history, function and meaning of different objects. But more importantly, they have connected these objects to the people who made them and we, in turn, have learned how fiber works contain aspects of kinship and community.

A number of sponsors enabled us to offer such a rich program. We are indebted to Trevor van Weeren and Gapuwiyak Culture & Arts, the American Australian Association, The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, the Northern Territory Government, the Mellon Indigenous Arts Initiative and McIntire Department of Art at UVA for their substantial contributions to this project.

MARGO SMITH AM, Director of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection
THE MAKING OF THE HAMBY COLLECTION

BY LOUISE HAMBY

For a quarter of a century I have researched and written about Aboriginal collections of material culture from Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory of Australia. This is the first time that I have been asked to write about a collection that is so personal, my own. It is only in the past decade that I have come to terms with the fact that I even have a fiber collection, let alone one that I can donate parts of to an established institution. I chose to donate the Hamby Collection to the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection because of my personal relationship with the people who work there, and, of course, because it's the only museum in America devoted to Australian Aboriginal Art.

Before I tell you about the history of my collection, it is important to understand the influences from my anthropological background. There are a few experiences that prompted me to think about my collecting rationale, the first one is a very academic one. As an editor with Lindy Allen and Nic Peterson for The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections (2008), and writing about the objects gathered by William Lloyd Warner (1898-1970), an American anthropologist, brought to the forefront issues about collectors, how and why they made collections, and the impact or meaning of their group of objects. I compare myself to Lloyd Warner in terms of collecting. Previously I have referred to him as the “reluctant collector” since this work was not the main purpose of his field work at Milingimbi but rather something he was required to do as part of his funding.¹ In a similar way to Warner, I went to Gapuwiyak having studied twined baskets in museum collections; I wanted to know more about certain ones that bore a resemblance to those collected by early anthropologists and missionaries. I never actually intended to make a collection.

Drawing on the writing of Leonn Satterthwait, a museum specialist who wrote about collections, I like to think of the Hamby Collection at Kluge-Ruhe as an artifact or an object with distinct characteristics.² As a collective artifact, all works are from Gapuwiyak, all were made by women, all were made using materials from their country and all were collected by me. The Hamby Collection at Kluge-Ruhe is representative of the variety of works made by different artists and clan groups at the time. The objects can be read as individual works like the canoe basket by Ruby Guyula, small family groups like the string bags of sisters Lucy Wanapuyngu and Florence Ashley or similar style objects or forms in the section titled “More Than Seeds.” Examining the sum of all the individual items with their detailed information is greater than the whole collection. Warner and Satterthwait’s theories incited me to consider the objects I had acquired over the years.
Another reason for seeing my growing group of objects as a collection was a practical one. In 1998, I moved into a new house in Canberra in which a wall-to-wall storage cupboard had to be built to house my fiber objects, a reminder that perhaps I did have a substantial group of objects. A mass of cardboard boxes in my home office and studio meant a storage unit elsewhere was needed. Lastly, and perhaps the most revealing prompt, was the formation of a database that was originally designed for my study of old baskets in museum collections, and which transformed to include works considered for *Art on a String: Threaded Objects from the Central Desert and Arnhem Land* (2001), as well as contemporary fiber works. When a couple hundred works grew into triple digits, there was no denial of the fact that I had a fiber art collection.

So how did my accumulation of baskets, mats, necklaces, string bags, and bodywear turn into conscious collecting?

I admit, now, to having a passion for obtaining objects that give me pleasure and putting them together with other objects, but this was not always the case. Everyone buys things that could be the basis of a collection if they continued to buy with intention. The first Aboriginal basket that I bought in 1991 was an ochred twined pandanus one from Yirrkala, sold to me during the time when Steve Fox was the art advisor. As I mentioned earlier, I had been studying baskets in museum collections and I wanted one for myself that was twined and ochred. It was not until my years of PhD research at Gapuwiyak (1995-2001) that I started to accumulate baskets. While living there I often bought work from the artists with whom I was learning what I thought would be “everything there is to know about baskets.” Upon reflection, I realized that that aim was unrealistic, and I was fortunate to have the opportunity to learn basics. At the time I did not consider myself to be a collector, just someone who supported people by buying their work. It was difficult for the women
there to sell their work as there was no art center and they had to travel to either Elcho Island or Yirrkala to sell their work. With the travel costs subtracted, their pay from the sold works was sometimes nothing, but the travel allowed them to visit and shop.

During the time I lived in Gapuwiyak, while working on my thesis, my rationale for buying objects, other than helping the artists, grew to include other criteria. With limited funds I couldn’t buy all the baskets that were offered to me. I bought baskets from the women with whom I worked and had a strong kin relationship. Gurruŋu, or kinship, carries responsibilities, and I would often buy baskets from my adopted sister for that reason alone, which had nothing to do with the aesthetic qualities of the work or what category it might fit into. Because of my questioning and my relationships with the women, some baskets were produced that were not visible when I first came. Without intending to do so I influenced what women made. I bought ones that were offered to me that reflected those desires like the magnificent ochred bathi made by Nancy Walinyinawuy Guyula (1940-2017) in 1999. Walinyinawuy’s sedge grass baskets are like ones from the Donald Thomson collection. I have often thought I could put one of hers in a drawer in the museum with old ones and visitors would not see much difference. Another example of my preference was seen in a series of baskets made by my adopted sister Ruby Gubiyarrawuy Guyula. It was only after I had bought more than one of these did I realise the significance of the naku bathi (canoe basket) for her. They were the canoes that the Ancestral Djang’kawu Sisters travelled in on their journeys, and after she told me that, I bought every one that I could including Gubiyarrawuy Guula’s from 1999, exhibited in With Her Hands: Women’s Fiber Art From Gapuwiyak.

These early pieces from my collection came about through my methodology of field work rather than an a priori plan of what my collection should contain. As a Research Fellow, after obtaining my first Australian Research Council Grant in 2003, which looked at the collections of Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land, it became apparent that people in other communities thought of me as “the basket lady.” This meant that other women from different communities would also bring me baskets to buy even if baskets were not the reason for my being in their community.

There has been a change in my documentation of the collected objects from my thesis research time until now. Since I no longer live in the community, I am not able to document the processes and development of works that I purchase in the same amount of detail. My time as an ARC researcher has honed my desire for provenance and the significance of what I buy in relation to what I already have.
The transport of objects from the community before there was an art center was often difficult, but it also brought out my determination to acquire certain objects. On one trip to Gove from Gapuwiyak, I took with me a spear. The Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) pilot, Phil Dodd, was most helpful; we just put the spear in the aisle between the seats of the small eight-seater plane, and passengers stepped over it! This was not acceptable for Qantas Airlines and various cardboard tubes were found in Gove and taped together before it could go in the cargo hold. Animal figures were a problem as packaging was scavenged from old bread cartons from the ALPA store or any old packing that friends like Silke Roth, inaugural art advisor, gave me.

I have been known to share my bed with sculptural pieces to protect them during the journey from Gapuwiyak via Gove or Darwin to Canberra. Conservators would be horrified by the conditions which were not at all like the refined ones used for the international transport of the Collection to the Kluge-Ruhe or their beautiful new storage boxes made by Kluge-Ruhe Collections Manager Nicole Wade.

Those objects and other artworks, like bark paintings, that have a link to fiber objects, either through the subject matter depicted or a personal relationship to the artist, are in my bigger collection. Many of the most recent additions, printed fabrics, reflect my interest in fiber objects through their subject matter. Most of the objects are from Arnhem Land but there is representation from other parts of Australia, Queensland, Torres Strait, Tasmania, New South Wales and a few other countries, such as Malaysia and Borneo. Almost a third of the collection has its origin in Gapuwiyak. It is from this larger collection that a smaller one has been curated and gifted to the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection.

On reflection, the items that I bought in the early years were representative not just of what was being made but what people wanted me to have, either through my own conversations or what they thought was acceptable. They were in control of the situation, indeed some of the items in my collection were gifts, not something that I requested. This was made possible because of my relationships, including kinship ones, with people. Relationships and connections with people and place have also played a part in my formation of the Hamby Collection for Kluge-Ruhe. I am an American but more specifically a southerner from North Carolina, and I wanted to share my love of Arnhem Land fiber art and the people of Gapuwiyak with those from my own country. The Kluge-Ruhe is a good solution for me; I have been a researcher there over many years and have developed a strong friendship with the staff. This institution is in the perfect place for *With Her Hands*, to educate people about the importance of fiber art in women’s everyday life in Gapuwiyak and throughout Arnhem Land.
Louise Hamby with artists Anna Ramatha Malibirr (left) and Lucy Malirrimurruwuy Wanapuŋu (right).

NOTES

BEHIND THE SCENES

BY CASSIE DAVIES AND EVA LATTERNER

*With Her Hands: Fiber Art from Gapuwiyak* celebrates the work of Aboriginal women fiber artists. Based on a gift from anthropologist Louise Hamby, and curated by six female students with significant guidance from both Hamby and visiting fiber artists Lucy Malirrimurrwuy Waṉapuŋu and Anna Ramatha Malibirr, the exhibition honors the artistic excellence of fiber work, as well as the ingenuity and accomplishment of women makers.

In the Euro-American art world, fiber works have traditionally been placed into the categories of “craft” and “women’s work.” Aboriginal bark paintings produced by men, for example, have been given precedence as both artistic masterworks and as indexes of cultural knowledge, and it is only recently that “craft” forms such as those in *With Her Hands* have gained recognition for their artistry. Yolŋu people, however, do not subscribe to the same western binaries that separate art and craft. Instead, art objects and practices are part of everyday life and constitute one of the central sites of cultural knowledge in the form of ceremony, daily use and kinship relationships.

Missionaries arrived in Arnhem Land in the early twentieth century, bringing with them the tastes and needs of the European market. They encouraged Yolŋu fiber artists to alter their techniques and materials—eliminating ochre paint, flattening mats, introducing coiling—in order to make their art more desirable for consumers, and also to bring women makers more in line with western Christian standards of production. Arnhem Land fiber artists integrated these new styles into their practice, in order to take part in larger markets and to produce new and innovative forms.

The fiber art that is produced in Gapuwiyak today preserves many of the practices and meanings that existed before the arrival of missionaries; traditions that will continue to be passed down to future generations of artists. Along with these traditional foundations, women also bring new elements—materials, techniques and forms—that draw on the techniques they have learned for market demands. This fusion has resulted in unique functional *bathi* (container forms) such as string bags and twined and coiled baskets, as well as striking ornamental forms such as the crocodile and dolly-dolly figures.
With Her Hands represents the creative and intellectual labor of many gifted women; from the Gapuwiyak artists themselves, to the collector and exhibition curators at Kluge-Ruhe. We have had the pleasure of working with the six student curators from the initial brainstorming sessions to the hanging of the exhibition in the galleries. They embarked on the project with impressive diligence, verve and imagination, and by the end of the first week the students had already conceived of the show’s title and begun to lay out the galleries.

The exhibition could not have been mounted without the profound expertise and guidance of the fiber artists Lucy Malirrimurruwuŋu Waŋapuyŋu and Anna Ramatha Malibirr, or the collection donor Louise Hamby. During a three-week visit to the Kluge-Ruhe, Lucy, Anna and Louise taught us first-hand about the production and meaning of the works in the show, some of which were made by Lucy many years ago. Their knowledge and skill has been an invaluable resource to the curators as they studied fiber art from Gapuwiyak and brought the exhibition to life.

For both of us, working on an exhibition has been a new experience, and we have been learning along the way as much as the student curators. We are amazed by how much goes on behind the scenes at a museum: when you see the finished show with artworks like a crocodile mounted on a freshly painted green wall, you might not think about all the choices that went into getting that crocodile up there. The decision as to whether the wall should be “fresh cut grass” or “fiddlehead green” was a tense one, and the canoe exhibited on the adjacent wall, with its precariously curved bottom, almost didn’t make it into the show because of its delicate shape. Each panel of text was written, edited, re-written, and then edited several more times, and the layouts and contents of the galleries often changed day-to-day. Mounting this exhibition was certainly a crash-course in the teamwork and excitement of museum work.

This has also been our first encounter with fiber art, and we are so grateful to Louise for donating this incredible collection to Kluge-Ruhe. It has been a gift to spend time with, learn about, and work with these artworks. Something especially important that we have come to understand during this time is how much there is to learn about each individual artwork. Every piece in this exhibition tells the story of a person, a family, a community, a land, and a culture. You will learn pieces of these stories as you explore With Her Hands and the essays in this catalog.
Despite her relative youth, Anna Ramatha Malibirr is considered one of the leading necklace makers in Gapuwiyak. Her piece, *Necklace from 2012*, included in *With Her Hands*, is a signature work of striking contrasts. It was created using red bead tree seeds and painted “gumnuts”: the woody fruit of the eucalyptus tree. Malibirr often uses the colors red, black, and white, but will also use other bright acrylic colors in her necklaces. While in Charlottesville, she noted, “I was the first miyalk [woman] to do the painted gum nuts with balanda paint [acrylic]. All the dots different, or the line or stripe, that was my idea. Other miyalk used the normal ones, red, yellow, white [ochres].” In this piece, she chose a black base color, on which she painted a white polka-dot design because she wanted to “give the piece contrast.” She heightens this contrast by incorporating red bean tree seeds, placing four of these small seeds between each of the larger gumnuts.

Necklaces, called *girringirriŋ* or *manimani* in Yolŋu-matha, are an important cultural form made by women in Aboriginal communities in northeast Arnhem Land. Each necklace is carefully crafted by skilled artists such as Malibirr, with precise attention to aesthetic value. There are several components to this art form including the collection and preparation of the materials, threading and the sale or exhibition of the works.

The fifteen necklaces in *With Her Hands* are made with a variety of materials, including seeds, grass-stems and shells. The materials used in necklaces depend upon the necklace maker’s individual vision, but are also affected by art market trends. Seeds are the most common medium used for necklace making at Gapuwiyak. Different types include gumnuts, bloodwood seeds, bat-winged coral seeds and red bean tree seeds. At Gapuwiyak, however, the most popular material is crotalaria seeds, as can be seen in Malibirr’s *Necklace* (2000). More commonly known as “rattlepod” or “gamba pea” seeds, these are the signature necklace making material of Gapuwiyak. Despite this, crotalaria seed necklaces are a relatively contemporary phenomenon. Crotalaria plants are not native to Arnhem Land, and could not be used for necklaces until the availability of metal needles made it possible to thread these small delicate seeds. While necklaces using acrylic paint or crotalaria seeds might be a recent innovation, Yolŋu have been making things to wear on the chest and neck for centuries. Known as *nanarr*, grass stem necklaces, such as...
those in the exhibition by the sisters Mary Djupuduwuy Guyula and Margaret Ngangiyawuy Guyula, are part of a historic tradition in Arnhem Land. According to Malibirr’s mother, Lucy Malirrimurruwuy Waṉapuyŋu, “Long time ago, ladies used to wear these, make them pretty, so their husband or boyfriend will say ‘Ah! I love you! You have that beautiful necklace.’” The hollow nanarr stems are strung on handspun Kurrajong string, making them very labor intensive. Such necklaces are rarely made today, making these in With Her Hands rare contemporary examples of an ancient practice. Making necklaces for sale is a much newer practice. They are mostly made from natural materials threaded on monofilament fishing line. As Malibirr says, “I use fishing line, easy one.”

Necklaces are usually a solo activity but can be done by more than one woman. The creation process can be divided into five categories: collecting, preparation of materials, drilling, threading, and storage and sale. Malibirr describes the process: “First we collect them and start to make it smooth at one end, and put it in the right order, ready for the hot wire. Then we start to paint. I used to paint while my mother did
the threading. Working together.” Women often travel in groups to gather materials. During this process, elder women pass down information to younger women and children. Upon returning home, materials are sometimes shared with other women who were not able to go collecting. Large and medium size seeds have holes burned into them by using a hot wire. It is crucial that the wire goes in the seed straight not crooked. The ends of the pods are filed so that they sit flush against one another. While an artist is working, she will store necklaces on a fishing reel, as multiple necklaces are in production at a time.

At Gapuwiyak, women often take their necklaces to the art center to sell where they are tagged with the artist’s details. Consumer demand ultimately affects the materials that are used and collected. The more popular the design is, the more likely it is reproduced by the women. For example, although Yolŋu women like to make long necklaces, the demand for shorter necklaces by *balanda* (non-Indigenous) buyers is higher. Therefore, shorter necklaces are now more commonly made. And yet, each work remains a piece of unique, individual artistry, created with masterful patience to craft a culture that continues to enhance and transform the contemporary art world.

ANNA RAMATHA MALIBIRR, *Necklace*, 2013, acrylic paint, eucalyptus fruit and black velvet seeds on monofilament string. 2018.0005.081

FIBER CONNECTIONS: KINSHIP RELATIONS THROUGH STRING BAGS

BY ANTIONETTE GRIFFIN

I always sit with older ladies and watch, every Friday to Sunday, sit near to them, asking questions all the time. - LUCY MALIRRIMURRUWUY WANAPUYNU

According to Louise Hamby, “bathi gain meaning through the process of their creation... For Yolŋu women it is a means of learning and teaching about the environment, ancestral connections... social systems replicated in plants, relationship to the body, skills, collaboration and education.”

Bathi is a generic term that describes all containers used by Yolŋu, but this essay will explain the role that kinship plays in the creation of gay’wu (string bags) in Arnhem Land. Despite their simple appearance, gay’yu are the most labor intensive of all fiber objects that Yolŋu women make. They are looped from a continuous handspun piece of kurrajong string that requires the women to tuck their left leg under their body while their right leg is folded at an angle exposing the thigh. The movement of the hand on the thigh rolls the fiber and then plies it back upon itself. To loop the string bag, the legs of the women must be extended straight out in front of her and the bag stretched over her legs. This process requires extraordinary dexterity and skill.

While their flexibility makes them light and easily transportable, gay’wu can expand to hold many items. Gay’wu have been made, used and gifted for thousands of years, and can be seen in rock art throughout western Arnhem Land. They remain a favorite accessory among Yolŋu women and are used in everyday life at Gapuwiyak. While gay’wu are especially prized by Yolŋu women, they are not as recognized in the commercial art market.

Making gay’wu is time consuming and usually requires teamwork from a number of women in a household. From gathering the materials and setting them aside for looping, completing a bag is usually a long task.
Unlike the western nuclear family, a Yolŋu household is usually multi-generational, sometimes comprising up to twenty members. This system of kinship fosters and enables the transfer of cultural and artistic knowledge among and within families. Kin relationships are one of the most important means of establishing rights and responsibilities within Yolŋu society.

For Yolŋu, kinship is more than biological and people can have multiple mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. Maternal aunts are considered ŋäṉḏi (mothers); paternal uncles are considered mäḻu (fathers); what we might call cousins could be wāwa (brothers) or yapa (sisters). With all these pairings of potential mothers, fathers, and cousins, the making of artworks is a constant exchange of ideas and assistance. Women start on the gay’wu while the children may help collect materials. This practice is more useful for young girls who need to learn the ways of the elder women for when the time comes for them to make their own bags. While several women might work on a single bathi, credit is given to the one who had the starting idea. The influence of kinship is important because it is family who assist and gather materials for gay’wu. Making bathi is a highly social activity: women talk, laugh and gossip, all the while sharing ideas, techniques and styles.
The *gay’wu* I chose to place together in the exhibition are by two sisters: Lucy Malirrimurruwuy Waṉapuyŋu and her late sister Florence. Both women created *gay’wu* that are multicolored and share similar headband styles. Other shared methods can be seen through subtle variations of color and horizontal band looping which is a way of comparing how much is learned from other women in the family. With Lucy and Florence often collaborating and following what their mother, grandmother, and ancestors passed down to them, this continued to reinstate the usefulness of what has been created over the years. Though Lucy and Florence share familiar familial connections that can be seen in the *gay’wu* seen here, we can also note that Lucy experiments with more colors, even darker ones, in contrast with Florence. Also note that though Lucy and Florence share similar band looping patterns, Lucy adds more colors in the bands compared to Florence. This is important to see because it shows similarities between the two yapas, but upon closer observation, we can see that they each have their own personal stamp. While *gay’wu* were Florence’s signature form, her sister Lucy gained fame by working with a range of items including coiled and twined baskets as well as *gay’wu*, mats, and other artworks.

There is not one uniform way to make string bags, but stylistic influences do help every family tell its own personal story that will continue for generations throughout Arnhem Land. Though the branches grow in different directions, the roots remain the same.
TWISTED AND COILED: CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE THROUGH FIBER ART

BY HANNAH JEFFRIES

Why I teach my daughter for the future. So when I am gone, the stories in my mind can be passed on to her. - LUCY MALIRIMURRUWUY WANAPUYṈU

Before colonial contact, the fiber works produced by Yolŋu women were made for both everyday and ceremonial uses. Producing fibers from the plants that grow around them, Yolŋu women create intricate fiber works of traditional forms, colors and meanings. The prime location of northern Arnhem Land allowed for trade with other seafaring cultures, such as the Macassans from Sulawesi, who from the seventeenth century established trade networks to exchange goods and cultural practices. It was through this cultural exchange that Yolŋu adopted the word *bathi*, meaning “container.”

During the early part of the twentieth century, missionaries discouraged Yolŋu women from using traditional ochre paints on their fiber works because of its perceived spiritual significance. Using natural pandanus fibers was thought to release any spiritual significance and broaden the appeal of the works in a European art market. Unlike the Macassans, who only caused cultural influence, conversion and work ethic were the goals of missionaries. During this time the technique of coiling was introduced, originally from southeastern parts of Australia. Coiling is the process of taking a bundle of pandanus fibers while another is sewn around the core bundle, and the process is repeated. These fiber works were revered for their craftmanship, but not as art. Today, women’s fiber art is an important part of the contemporary Indigenous art world.

The fiber art works from the Yolŋu women of Gapuwiyak show their resilience of traditional generational knowledge. Using both new and traditional techniques, materials and forms, they innovate with pattern and color to refashion what a basket should look like. Today, Yolŋu women are able to sell their pieces in the art market, showcasing their talents.
I have learned many techniques from Nancy. I don't copy, I find my own ideas and style.

- LUCY MALIRRIMURRUWUY WANAPUYŇU

In her Needlepuy Buyu Dhunpa Bathi *(Round, Flat Bottomed Coiled Basket)* from 2005, Lucy Malirrimurruwuy Waṉapuyŋu has combined colors and techniques to create a work of expressive power. She learned many techniques from the now deceased master Nancy Walinyinawuy Guyula (1957-2018). The skill set she acquired allowed Lucy the confidence to experiment with new designs and patterns in her baskets. She now passes that knowledge around to help assist other women in the community. Lucy also brings with her the skill of knowing how to produce natural dyes, introducing a variety of new colors to experiment with.

*Needlepuy Buyu Dhunpa Bathi* is an excellent example of what Louise Hamby calls “fusion baskets,” combining multiple techniques and colors. It falls within a style of basket introduced by missionaries in that it has a flat bottom, is made by coiling and has a rigid handle. Lucy refers to a basket made by coiling as *needlepuy bathi*, or one made with a needle. This particular basket has broad vertical stripes that shimmer across the body of the basket, rather than the normal horizontal bands. She includes alternating bands of open-coiling allowing a view of the bundle of fibers inside. Another key characteristic of this basket is its handle, which is made from a three-coiled band or *lurrkun needlepuy wana*. The middle coil is made from fibers that come from the body of the basket, which is then reinforced with two outer coils.
Whenever I can make a pretty basket, I do. I used whatever colors that are around me. I use red, yellow, green, and black to make a pretty pattern to sell at the market.

- LUCY MALIRRIMURRUWUY WANAPUYṈU

Coiled baskets are rarely painted with designs. Rather, patterns are created by changing the color of the pandanus. The unusual green pandanus in this basket—a distinctive feature of Lucy’s work—is created by pounding the heart of the pandanus palm and then placing this in a pot of boiling water. The darkness of the green is controlled by the amount of pandanus heart added. The ash made from burning either coconut palm leaves or dried pandanus leaves might also be added. This color was not traditionally used by Yolŋu women, but was learned from artists at the community of Maningrida. Similarly, the material collected to make red dye, called ratjpa, is traded from Elcho Island. For Yolŋu, different colors or color combinations can have different ancestral associations, such as blood, fire, smoke or water. While artists like Lucy use expressive combinations of color and form to create innovative contemporary artworks, beneath the surface there are meanings known only to those women whose “clever hands” continue the traditions of fiber art in northeast Arnhem Land.

LUCY MALIRRIMURRUWUY WANAPUYṈU, Needlepuy Buyu Dhunpa Bathi (Round Flat-bottomed Coiled Basket), 2005, pandanus fiber and natural dyes. 2018.0005.024
Aboriginal makers do not live in a past time and like most other artists their work is often a reflection of current politics and events. – LOUISE HAMBY

Yolŋu culture is centered around stories of ancestral beings who are considered as being both past and present. For Yolŋu, time is not linear but builds in a continuum, so their ancestors are contemporaneously as well as historically important. The Djaŋ’kawu Sisters are two of the most prominent ancestral beings, and their journey via paperbark canoe from the northeast across Arnhem Land has inspired artwork in northeast Arnhem Land for centuries. In the past, canoes were also an important method of transportation through the chains of islands in coastal areas. Ruby Gubiyarrawuy Guyla’s fiber Naku Bathi (1997) is a modern manifestation of this traditional method of transport, while also alluding to the ancestral canoes which carried the Djaŋ’kawu Sisters on their travels.

The naku bathi is unique to Ruby Gubiyarrawuy Guyla. Its name means “canoe basket” and it is characterized by its long and thin form, with pointed ends to represent the prow and stern of a canoe. Gubiyarrawuy began making naku bathi in 1997, and her progress mirrors the journey of fiber work in Gapuwiyak. Her earliest naku bathi has three-coiled handles, “mark[ing] the positions where people were to sit.”¹ Each handle is created with three tight coils that allow them to remain upright. Coiling is considered a traditional technique, despite being brought to Gapuwiyak by European missionaries. This technique was taught and encouraged by missionaries to Yolŋu people while also restricting the creation of painted, ceremonial objects as a way of controlling their identity and creating generic work to be sold for missionary funds. Yolŋu women adopted the technique of coiling and also continued twining, sometimes combining the two forms and adding dye colors to create vibrant new works.

Gubiyarrawuy reflects this by decreasing the amount of coiling in her second naku bathi, which has only two handles, both of which are single coiled and thus not as rigidly built. She then adds small coiled handles over the prow and stern to emphasize the “canoeness” of the work and its connection to the one used by the Djaŋ’kawu Sisters. This naku bathi serves as a mnemonic for the Yolŋu to recall the Djaŋ’kawu Sisters
and the places they created. Outsiders who do not have this knowledge would only see the magnificent art piece and not the narratives that it tells. This is best seen in the final and largest work in Gubiyarrawuy’s trio of *naku bathi*, which has only two small handles that loop over the ends. Because these handles are so small and ineffective for actually carrying the basket, they function on an aesthetic rather than a utilitarian level.

However, Gubiyarrawuy was not done and went beyond a simple mnemonic purpose to take advantage of the freedom of artistic expression that Yolŋu women found in the commercialization of baskets. *Naku Bathi* (1999) was made after her initial trio of canoe baskets and features a more contemporary style than her previous *naku bathi*. Gubiyarrawuy retains the handles over the ends of the basket but adds spaces along the top rows of coils to create windows. By creating a modern take on her *naku bathi*, she revives the tradition of conveying ancestral stories and she encourages further innovation in fiber art. Despite the efforts of missionaries to contain Yolŋu identity, “many of the new basket forms created in Arnhem Land are a result of a combination of factors, but they all appear to have their connection to something important for the maker, an ancestral connection or link to their own country.”

To the displeasure of early anthropologists who valued these objects according to their “authenticity” or traditional aesthetic, Yolŋu artists rejoiced in experimentation with color and patterns and forms and sharing their discoveries. This reflects the transition from ceremonial and personal use to commercial use for Yolŋu fiber artists. As a result, Ruby Gubiyarrawuy’s *naku bathi* combine both cultural significance and traditional techniques with artistic expression and innovation as seen in the larger contemporary Gapuwiyak fiber art movement.

NOTES

2 Ibid, 243.
THE POWER OF BATHI

BY VICTORIA M. MORALES RODRÍGUEZ

Yolŋu women have been making baskets for thousands of years. Traditionally, these baskets were utilitarian objects that carried personal items and food, or they were made for use in ceremonies, but over the years their purpose has changed. In Gapuwiyak, women have gained a lot of recognition in the art world for their fiber work, and most baskets are now made for the art market. These baskets show a fusion of traditional methods with contemporary ideas. In other instances, women make bathi that adhere to time-honored traditions that connect them to their ancestors—such as Nancy Walinyinawuy Guyula’s Dimbuka (1999) included in With Her Hands.

Dimbuka are tightly twined baskets traditionally used for gathering honey, a prized food in Gapuwiyak. Its close, three-stranded twine makes it watertight, and sometimes the interior of a dimbuka might be coated with beeswax for an even tighter seal. This basket is important not only for its practical use, but also because of its connection with ancestral honey spirits. In ceremony, the Yolŋu dance with the bathi tied around their heads, embodying the actions of the ancestors. This dance is performed so the people looking for honey can find it and bring it home. For Yolŋu, ceremonial dance is a way of connecting with the ancestors, so they can learn from them and pass that knowledge onto future generations.

If the women in the community don’t have a dimbuka at hand, they can use a temporary container like a piece of raŋan (paperbark) or an old tin. Finding honey is a hard job that requires splitting a tree with an axe and digging into the trunk. Women use their hands rather than specialized utensils to obtain and deposit honey in the dimbuka. This is a potentially tedious and troublesome task because it can disturb the hive bees, which will often fly around their heads and bodies, sometimes getting caught in their hair and noses. The journey of creating this dimbuka was not an easy one. It began with gathering leaves of the Pandanus spiralis: small trees with long, spiny leaves and large, pineapple-like clusters of fruit. Women usually go to get pandanus in pairs or groups, sometimes bringing with them their children. While some women go to collect the pandanus, stripping the leaves from trees and gathering them into a bundle, the rest look after the children. Upon their return to Gapuwiyak, they might share the pandanus with other women in the community. The leaves are then laid out to dry. Before the twining begins, the leaves might be dyed using natural pigments, but the pandanus of this dimbuka were kept undyed. The twining technique used to make this bathi has been around for thousands of years in Arnhem Land. It is a simple form that consists
NANCY WALINYINAWUY GUYULA, Dimbuka, 2009, pandanus fiber, handspun kurrajong string and natural pigments. 2018.0005.024
of twisting together pandanus, starting with the bottom of the basket and then curving upwards. This laborious process is called *djanyarr*.

This honey basket is the only painted *bathi* in *With Her Hands*, and though it was made for the art market, it is reminiscent of painted baskets used by Yolŋu people in ceremonies. Today, most baskets are made from fibers dyed with roots or leaves. This *ḏimbuka*, however, has been painted using ochres, which would be ground and mixed with a fixative.

For ceremonial *bathi*, these patterns hold significant meaning. They might refer to a person's relationship to their clan or country, or to the ancestors who are very much present in their lives. The stripes painted on this *ḏimbuka* probably relate to sacred clan designs called *maŋayin miny’ṯji*, which were created by the ancestral beings during the *waŋarr* (creation time). Because these designs are controlled by men, female artists like Walinyinawuy will not share information about the meaning of these designs. The most sacred *bathi* are adorned with feathers and sacred pendants.

In keeping with tradition, Yolŋu women's knowledge of *bathi* is passed down to other women and children. Although traditionally, these are rituals, dances and ceremonies, they are now also everyday activities; therefore they can use contemporary utensils to help them in their journey and get the honey much faster. Yolŋu women help each other in every way, basket making is their tradition and their way to connect with their community and ancestry. As these women dedicate their lives to fiber work, we can admire their work for the art that it is.
Margaret Ngangiyawuy Guyula begins the laborious process of collecting pandanus.

An artist from Gapuwiyk begins a twined bathi.
MATRIARCHS OF FIBER ART: MOTHERHOOD AND MAT-MAKING

BY DIANA PROENZA

When we start the mat... we keep moving around—bil’yun—moving and changing colors. That’s it. — LUCY MALIRRIMURRUWUY WANAPUYNGU

The legacy of mat-making in Gapuwiyak attests to an abiding celebration of the sanctity of motherhood in Yolŋu culture. Most mats produced in Gapuwiyak today are flat, like Ruby Gubiyarrawuy Guyula’s Mat 1997 in the Louise Hamby Collection at Kluge-Ruhe, but the earliest mat forms were actually conical in shape, with fringed bottoms. Known by Yolŋu as ŋanmarra, these conical mats have a long symbolic history of birth and motherhood. Although they are no longer in use, contemporary artists retain the ŋanmarra’s traditional meaning as they create new, innovative fiber works.

The history of mats begins with the Djaŋ’kawu Sisters, Yolŋu creation beings, who used a conical mat to incubate black beetle larvae, nurturing their cocooned bodies until they were reborn. Conical mats are also mentioned elsewhere in the Djaŋ’kawu narratives: the Sisters are said to have birthed the Dhuwa moiety on a ŋanmarra, and, in the Djaŋ’kawu manikay (ceremonial songs), the ŋanmarra is shown to be a vehicle of sacred power: “What is that, Sister? Show me? I see a mangrove shell / Come, pour them in here; put them as sacred, within the mat!” Spreading the skirt of feathery pandanus fringe, the Djaŋ’kawu Sisters established the ceremonial agency of the conical mat. It is from these various narratives that ŋanmarra were adopted by Yolŋu people as a customary birthing mat, allowing women to recall and praise their own ancestral mothers while bringing new life into their community.

The flattened style of Gubiyarrawuy’s mat might have been the result of some encouragement by missionaries, but contemporary artists continue to use this form, adding new colors and twining techniques. In the other mats in With Her Hands, there is a diversity of thickness in coils (see for instance Lesley Wininingu Guyula’s Mat, 2007), openness in twined pandanus strands (see Rudy Munguluma Biḏiŋal’s Mat, 2009), and striking sequences of bold color (see Patricia Biḏiŋal’s Mat, 1999). Observing the collection, donor Louise Hamby instantly recognized the mat by Gubiyarrawuy, her adopted sister.
A flamboyant and innovative artist, Ruby was renowned for her radiant objects and her expert execution of *bil* (cross-twining), as can be seen on this particular work. *Bil* requires a steady hand that can intricately intertwine multicolored strands, creating these dynamic patterns across lengthy fibers. The contrasting pattern of red and gold dyes activates a pulsating energy as it repeats in rhythmic bands across the mat, invoking the shimmering brilliance of the sun—described by fellow artist Lucy Malirrimurrunguy Wanapuŋu as *miny'tji walupuy*.

Like all fiber artistry, mat-making is very physical work. The whole body of the artist is involved in the creation of a mat; when twining her mat, Ruby Gubiyarrawuy Guyula would have wrapped the pandanus strands around her forearms, toes and elbows. The width and proportions of her own body instructed every stitch, stamping her work with a physical signature. The anatomical language used by Yolŋu women even suggests the mat as a surrogate for the female body: the center or beginning of the mat is known as the *giningarr* (navel), metaphorically correlating the creation of a mat to the birth of a child. Other women are often involved in the process of making a mat: daughters and granddaughters watch and assist in collecting materials, stripping, drying and dyeing. A close inspection of the patterns and techniques used on a single mat may reveal different hands, sometimes those of a mother and her daughter.

These familial ties are essential to the continuity of mat-making in Gapuwiyak. Elder Yolŋu women pass down their knowledge through stories and songs, sharing the practice of mat-making with their female kin. That said, Yolnu women also go beyond their familial ties, teaching what they know to balanda (non-Aboriginal people). “Every house,” says Lucy Malirrimurrunguy Wanapuyngu, “I go and teach there.” It is through teaching that the practice of mat-making in Gapuwiyak connects the past and present, binding generations of female artists to the spiritual resonance of the *ŋañmarra*.

NOTES

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Djōngu (Hat) 2000  
LINDA MINAWALA BIḌIŊAL  
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes  
2018.0005.001

Baguru (String headband) 2002  
RUDY MUNGULUMA BIḌIŊAL  
Handspun kurrajong string  
2018.0005.002

Waṇa (Armband) 2002  
RUDY MUNGULUMA BIḌIŊAL  
Handspun kurrajong string, cane and wax  
2018.0005.004

Waṇa (Armband) 2002  
RUDY MUNGULUMA BIḌIŊAL  
Handspun kurrajong string, cane and wax  
2018.0005.003

Needlepuy Bathi Garrar Raki Waṇa 1997  
DOROTHY NJMANYDJURRU MAḌARRPA  
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes  
2018.0005.005

Batḥi 1997  
MARY DJUPUDUWUY GUYULA  
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes  
2018.0005.006

Bowl 1998  
RUBY GUBIYARRAWUY GUYULA  
Pandanus fiber, handspun kurrajong string and natural dyes  
2018.0005.008

Twined flat-bottomed basket with coiled handle 1998  
KATHY NYINYIPUWA GUYULA  
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes  
2018.0005.010

Straight Basket 1998  
RUBY GUBIYARRAWUY GUYULA  
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes  
2018.0005.012

Bathi 1999  
NANCY WALINYINAWUY GUYULA  
Pandanus fiber, natural dyes and natural pigments  
2018.0005.014

Straight Basket 1996  
MARY DJARRYJARRMINYPUY BIRRITJIAMA  
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes  
2018.0005.016

Bathi 1997  
MARY DJUPUDUWUY GUYULA  
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes  
2018.0005.006

Bathi 1996  
MARY DJARRYJARRMINYPUY BIRRITJIAMA  
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes  
2018.0005.011
Bulpu’ Needlepuy 1999
LUCY MALIRRIMURRUWUY WANAPUYNU
Pandanus fiber, handspun kurrajong string and natural dyes
2018.0005.017

Bulpu’ 2000
NANCY WALINVINAWUY GUYULA
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes
2018.0005.019

Bulpu’ Needlepuy 2000
RUDY MUNGULUMA BIDINAL
Pandanus fiber, handspun kurrajong string and natural dyes
2018.0005.020

Bathī 2003
MARGARET NANJIYAWUY GUYULA
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes
2018.0005.023

Round Flat-bottomed Coiled Basket 2005
LUCY MALIRRIMURRUWUY WANAPUYNU
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes
2018.0005.024

Twined Flat Bottom Basket with Handspun String Handle 2008
KATHY WALAWUN GUYULA
Pandanus fiber, handspun kurrajong string and natural dyes
2018.0005.032

Coiled basket with Open-coiling 2008
NANCY WALINVINAWUY GUYULA
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes
2018.0005.033

Little Basket 2008
NANCY WALINVINAWUY GUYULA
Pandanus fiber, handspun kurrajong string and natural dyes
2018.0005.034

Bulpu’ Needlepuy 1998
RUDY MUNGULUMA BIDINAL
Pandanus fiber, handspun kurrajong string and natural dyes
2018.0005.036

Round Basket 2005
NANCY WALINVINAWUY GUYULA
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes
2018.0005.038

Open-coil handbag with three-coiled handle 2009
WENDY WULNGUWULNGU GUYULA
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes
2018.0005.039

Purse 2007
LESLEY WINININGU GU-YULA
Pandanus fiber and natural dyes
2018.0005.039

Bulpu’ Ratjarrk 2009
NANCY WALINVINAWUY GUYULA
Sedge grass, pandanus fiber, and handspun kurrajong string
2018.0005.041
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Maker</th>
<th>Material/Components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Mary Djupuduwuy</td>
<td>Crotalaria seeds and monofilament string</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Lucy Malirrimurruwuy</td>
<td>Crotalaria seeds and monofilament string</td>
</tr>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>Nancy Walinyinawuy</td>
<td>Rosary pea seeds and monofilament string</td>
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<tr>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Lucy Malirrimurruwuy</td>
<td>Red bean tree seeds and velvet bean seeds and monofilament string</td>
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<td>Mary Djupuduwuy</td>
<td>Handspun kurrajong string and grass seeds</td>
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<td>2001</td>
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<td>Kathy Walawun G dulyla</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>Penny Milingu</td>
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<td>Patricia Bidinal</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>Rhonda Guyula</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Ruby Cubiyarruwuy</td>
<td>Pandanus fiber and natural dyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Anna Ramatha Malibirr</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Lucy Malirrimurruwuy</td>
<td>Snail shells, natural pigments and handspun kurrajong string</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mat</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Ruby Cubiyarruwuy</td>
<td>Pandanus fiber and natural dyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batjparra</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Linda Minawala Bidinal</td>
<td>Pandanus fiber and natural dyes</td>
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABOUT THE CURATORS

**BARRIANE FRANKS**
Barriane is an undergraduate student at Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana. She is majoring in Visual Arts with a minor in History. She will graduate in Spring 2021.

**ANTIONETTE GRIFFIN**
Antionette is an undergraduate student at Auburn University in Montgomery, Alabama, where she is majoring in Sociology and Anthropology, with a Certification in Museum Studies. She will graduate in Spring 2020.

**HANNAH JEFFRIES**
Hannah was raised in Durham, North Carolina. She is an enrolled member of the Meherrin Indian Tribe of Ahoskie, North Carolina. She is a Junior at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, where she serves as President of the Native American Student Organization. She is majoring in American Indian Studies and will graduate in Fall 2020.

**HELEN MARTINEZ**
Helen is an undergraduate student in the Honors Program at the University of Houston-Downtown. She is majoring in History and will graduate in Fall 2019. She hopes to go on to do a PhD in History, with the goal of working as a Historian at a museum.

**VICTORIA MORALES RODRIGUEZ**
Victoria is an undergraduate student at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez Campus, where she is majoring in Plastic Arts with a minor in Education. She will graduate in May 2020.

**DIANA PROENZA**
Diana is an undergraduate student at New College of Florida. She is majoring in Art History and English Literature, and her thesis is on women in avant-garde magazines from the early-twentieth century. She will graduate in May 2020.
ABOUT THE ADVISORS

LUCY MALIRRIMURRUWUY WAṈAPUYṈU

Lucy was born at Mainoru cattle station in 1951. She moved to Roper River when she was four, where she lived for eight years. From Roper, she moved to Galiwin’ku, where she married Ian Wurrwul and had five children, before moving to Gapuwiyak. Lucy is a master fiber artist and an advocate for people with disabilities. Her works have been shown in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (2013) and the exhibitions Women With Clever Hands (2010) and Art on a String (2001). She has participated and held workshops in many Selling Yarns conferences.

ANNA RAMATHA MALIBIRR

Anna was born in Gapuwiyak in 1987, where she still lives. Her mother is Lucy Malirrimurruwuy WaṈapuyṈu, and her father is Ian Wurrwul Malibirr. Lucy and Ruby Gubiarrawuy taught Anna how to make baskets when she was a child. Anna now makes baskets, mats and string bags, and she is particularly well-known for her necklaces. Her son, Ryan Mununggurr, was born in May 2005. Her works have been shown in the exhibitions Women With Clever Hands (2010) and Art on a String (2001).

LOUISE HAMBY

Louise is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Australian National University in Canberra. Most recently she was the Chief Investigator on the Australian Research Council Grant, Fifty Years of Collecting at Milingimbi. She has spent decades researching fiber objects from Arnhem Land, past and present. She first went to Gapuwiyak in 1995 to start her PhD, and was adopted by Ruby Gubiarrawuy (1937-2005). She has continued her relationship with Gapuwiyak fiber artists. She published Containers of Power: Women with Clever Hands in 2010, the most comprehensive insight published yet into the Indigenous fiber art of northeast Arnhem Land.

CASSIE DAVIES AND EVA LATTERYER

Cassie and Eva are doctoral candidates in English at the University of Virginia. Cassie is a writer and editor from London and is the Poe/Faulkner Fellow in fiction. Eva studies nineteenth-century American literature and culture.