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Art

The Art of the Sacred and the Spurious

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**Attributed to Glenn Yarra *Bunyip Dreaming* (2006)**

The controversy currently raging about Aboriginal art in Australia carries the tag '[White hands on Black art](#)'. This tag was affixed by *The Australian* in their expose of the 'practice' or, as many would prefer, the malpractice. At the crux of the controversy is the accusation that those 'white hands', in painting on an otherwise 'black' canvas, have tainted the artwork irreparably: it is no longer sacred.

It is widely held in Australia – and not just within the cultural elite, where it would be expected – that Aboriginal art which depicts events and places of the mythic past of the Dreamtime, of which the artist is deemed to have timeless knowledge, is sacred in itself. For example, Christopher Allen, *The Australian's* art critic, recently suggested (*The Australian*, 11/4/23) that the meaning of the patterns on indigenous paintings could not be divulged to the uninitiated. In pub talk, the paintings depict matters not only sacred but secret. This is romantic sentimentalism.

I recently saw a painting called *Wati Kutjara* by acclaimed Aboriginal artist [Tommy Watson](#) in the book *Yannima Pikarli Tommy Watson*. The painting is striking for its patterns of red and brown land above which rise two stark white figures. No-one familiar with the mythology of Australia's Central Desert would fail to recognize the mythic Wati Kutjara, the 'Two Men'. For me, the painting is superior in design and emotional impact to any other Watson painting in the book. There is no doubting the artistry. What is open to debate — or ought to be — is whether the painting itself is 'sacred' in the religious sense. Because, if Aboriginal artwork is not sacred in that sense, then the 'white hands' are not involved in a sacrilegious 'theft of the Dreaming', as NT Arts Minister Chancey Paech romantically puts it, and the controversy becomes less emotional and can focus more usefully on any forgery and fabrication that is occurring.

Certainly, the Aboriginal art industry, artists and galleries alike, promote this 'sacred' tag, but this is in their interest: after all, that tag is where they get to fix the price. Another Watson painting of the same name – not nearly as good, in my opinion – is on sale for A\$180,000 (*below*) at the [Kate Owen Gallery](#) in Sydney.



In the desert mythology, Wati Kutjara (to use Watson's spelling) was a prominent member of the mythic mob that wandered into the Great Sandy Desert in the Dreamtime. This might be a mythologized memory of actual ancient migration which contemporary Aboriginal dogma would place about 50,000 years ago. It bears noting that the wandering mythic mob included Gunya Gudjara, the 'Two dogs' and, ignoring the Thylacine, dogs only arrived about 4000 years ago with people from southern India. Time-series analyses of archaeological sites by a team from ANU and other Australian universities suggest that the Great Sandy Desert might not have been inhabited until about 2000-1500 years ago; that is, about the time of Christ. There is no doubt that the mythology of Wati Kutjara's wanderings in the desert, moulding the landscape as he went, was once fundamental to the cult life of the Walbiri and Pintubi and other desert tribes. He was the totemic figure for the 'lodge' of initiated men whose spirit sites were along his tracks. His sites and rituals and cult objects would have been taboo to others and brutal punishment, including death, would have awaited any man who revealed them or any woman who violated them.

That time passed long ago. The artists don't live lives ruled by mythic totems anymore. If they did, they could not be revealing in their paintings the events and places 'sacred' to the cult. The blurb for Tommy Watson's book reflects this. He is painting 'Dreamtime stories inherited from his family', it says: 'sites and geographical features within his Country'. Stories inherited from his family; not 'sacred' myths and rituals passed down in secrecy by the initiated men of the tribe. Certainly, many Dreamtime stories are remembered in vivid detail, especially by the older people, and where the details have faded, they can always be redreamt. A new exegesis is easily developed, the anthropologists would say. The artists are free today to paint these stories of the mythic beings and the sites they inhabit. It is a freedom traditional life did not offer them.

In my office I have a copy of the painting *Minyipuru (right)*, the Seven Sisters, by Martu sisters Muni Rita Simpson, Rosie Williams and Dulcie Gibbs from the Martumili artistic group in Western Australia's Pilbara region. The Seven Sisters are also primary subjects of widely recognized artists such as Andrea Adamson, Gabriella Possum Nungurrayi and Athena Nangala Granites from the APY community in Central Australia.

In the Dreamtime, the Seven Sisters were travelling southeast from the WA coast, venturing deeper and deeper into the desert. At a waterhole called Kalypa (Well 23 on the Canning Stock Route) they met men for the first time but fought off their sexual advances. An older man, known to different tribes by various names, including Wati Nyiru and Jukurra, tried to rape the oldest sister and, to escape, the girls fled to the far south and into the heavens where they become the constellation known to us as the Pleiades.

Their amorous pursuer became the star Orion and every night he follows the Sisters across the sky.

There is a curious parallel here to the Greek myth which tells of the Seven Sisters, the daughters of Atlas who held the celestial spheres on his shoulders. The sisters were being pursued by the lusty great hunter Orion and to protect them Zeus turned them into stars of the Pleiades. It is amazing that Australian and Aegean observers, thousands of years and kilometres apart, saw in the same stars this same vision of a lusty man chasing nubile young women across the night sky. It's a small world, after all.

Some of the paintings of the Seven Sisters by these APY women are stunning images, with dotted spheres showing the sister stars clustered together or fleeing down the canyons of the night, while Orion burns brightly close by or swirls in orange dots in hot pursuit.

But we face the same questions posed by Watson's Wati Kutjara. Why are these painting considered sacred by so many people? Perhaps they would argue, along with SA Arts Minister Andrea Michaels, that the story of the Seven Sisters is sacred in itself, as are all the Dreamtime stories. But if that is so, what do we say of other paintings of the mythic origins of the Pleiades? What of Elihu Vedder's painting (*below*), for instance, hanging in the American Metropolitan Museum of Art, showing the Seven Sisters bound by chords to their respective stars and dancing with flowing robes and bare breasts.





Is Vedder's painting sacred too? And if not, why not? After all, it depicts essentially the same myth, albeit set in another landscape. Certainly, the Aboriginal paintings of the Seven Sisters are more appealing to the modern

eye than Vedder's 19th Century classical style, but that is a measure of aesthetics, not sacredness.



A multitude of questions emerge from all this. Would those who hold sacred the Aboriginal paintings of Wati Kudjara or Minyipuru also hold sacred paintings by a devout Christian of Christ's apostles walking by the Sea of Galilee? Or off Christ himself calming the raging seas and walking on the water? Is Salvador Dalí's *Christ of St John of the Cross* a sacred painting (*left*)? Even with Australia's Christian identity fading fast, being just 44per cent in the 2022 census (and

much of that nominal only), this sacred designation for matters considered 'pagan' barely three generations ago is an amazing socio-cultural phenomenon. At its core is the romantic idolizing of the 'native' cultures which is widespread today, having moved beyond the intellectual elite to the general public.

The idea of the ‘sacredness’ of traditional Aboriginal society began around the turn of the 20th Century as part of a broader re-interpretation by Western intellectuals of the spirituality of ‘primitive’ societies. Tribal customs and taboos, initially viewed as pre-religious belief structures, came to be seen as profound religious systems in their own right. Myths were no longer primitive beliefs but sacred and fundamental truths. Specifically, Aboriginal mythology was the ‘sacred’ history of the Dreamtime, and traditional Aboriginal life, re-imagined as a re-enacting of that sacred past, must itself be sacred. This, of course, was but another example of Western intellectuals dreaming paradisaical myths of noble man and a golden past before the corrupting impact of capitalist industrial society, but it was widely heard by the broader Australian public and influenced the profound social changes that began at that time, including the popular romanticism regarding Aboriginal culture.

For this extensive audience, Aboriginal art became their window to a sacred past where believers imagine Aboriginal nations living peacefully in harmony with nature and each other, all blessed with a spirituality unknown, indeed unknowable, to ‘white’ people. For them, the paintings are sacred and often come with the spiritual bonus that the holiness is too secret to share.

All this demands, of course, that the painting is by an Aborigine – and only an Aborigine. If a white man contributes to the painting in any way, even by artistic suggestion regarding the interplay of space and colour or the balance of the colours, the painting is corrupted, as NT Minister Paech put it. The Tjukurpa, the sacred Dreaming, has been interfered with, he said. The art is no longer sacred, and its commercial value is diminished accordingly.

The suggestion – indeed, the dictate – is that a white person must not paint Aboriginal Dreamtime stories. The wonderful paintings by Ainslie Roberts from his Dreamtime exhibitions and books from the late 1960s and 1970s would be rejected today as cultural appropriation (*his The Ninya is reproduced at right*). This is despite his extensive and detailed knowledge of the mythology, and his commitment to show Australians, in his words, the ‘ancient cultural heritage they should be aware of and respect’.



Inevitably, flawed ideas reveal themselves by their absurdities. If a white Christian Anglo-Celtic person must not paint Aboriginal stories, does this mean Aboriginal people must not paint Christian Anglo-Celtic stories? And what if the Aboriginal is a devout practising Christian? Is he still allowed to paint the Dreamtime stories and, if he does, will they be sacred?

What of the full-blood Aboriginal who asks his white mate what he thinks of the latest painting? *Needs more blue in the waterhole*, his mate says. *I can't reach it from here*, the artist says. *You do it*. So, his white mate adds a little dark blue for depth in the waterhole, and we are told the painting is irreparably tainted. Yet a painting by a fair-skinned primarily Anglo-Celtic woman with only minor Aboriginal parentage is authentic beyond question because the woman identifies as Aboriginal. None of this is to question that much of the work by Aboriginal artists is deserving of the applause it earns. Whether it is deserving of the price tags it commands, is a matter for the market to determine and is not the issue here.

It is equally true that much Aboriginal art is of debatable artistic merit and the gushing praise can often be patronising. The 2023 Sulman Prize winning *Monster Coming* by Doris Bush Nungarrayi (*below*), for example, has been described by Christopher Allan (*The Australian*, 6-7/5/23) as a picture of little doll-like goblins that would have been considered childish were it not painted by an old Aboriginal woman. Equally, much Aboriginal art can be repetitious, reflective of the speed and volume of production from some artists and communities. There are reportedly thousands of Aboriginal artists in the Central Desert region. One community was reported to be 25 per cent artists. This was not an 'artists community'; this was 25 per cent of the resident Aboriginal population.



Even some of the highly treasured artists produce very repetitious work. For example, multiple paintings of the [Seven Sisters advertised for sale](#) on the internet are [clearly variations](#) on [the same image](#), seen from [different perspectives and distance](#). In fairness, most, perhaps all, are striking images, but the similarities are obvious. It is, of course, not uncommon for artists to paint the same theme many times, constantly seeking to capture it precisely, but such repetition must be careful lest it become the Central Desert equivalent of the production-line paintings of Rome's Coliseum or the Sydney Opera House. Those variations in quality will be sorted out in the marketplace – though in this instance, the price might be loaded up with sacred baggage. *Caveat emptor!*

Given the current idolizing in Australia of a re-imagined traditional Aboriginal society, and the socio-cultural malaise within which that flourishes, it is unlikely that we will see any return to a less romantic view of Aboriginal art in the near future. The Western urban intellectual enthusiasm for the 'primitive' and the woke requirements for Australian corporate lobby and boardroom walls will sustain the high-end Aboriginal art market for the foreseeable future. For many in the broader public, the fetishizing of Aboriginal art will manifest itself more in the enthusiasm for Aboriginal imagery on football jumpers and other paraphernalia.

The white hands/black art controversy is not simply an objection to many hands making light work. Multiple people contributing to a painting is not uncommon among Aboriginal and other artistic communities, as evidenced by the acceptance of non-Indigenous collaborators on paintings submitted for the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards. The problem is the creation of those who see light hands making sacred black works profane. There is obviously a racial element at play here and, while it accords with prevailing woke notions of Aboriginal cultural exceptionalism, it is counter to any rational appreciation of art. As Philip Hook, the former director at both Sotheby's and Christie's, has noted, art is 'a commodity whose value has little intrinsic or objective value but is vastly inflatable by fantasy'. The fantasy here is that a painting of Dreamtime events by an Aboriginal is sacred in itself, and can be priced accordingly for a believing market.

The quality and value of the painting is no longer simply a measure of its artistry; it is also being determined by the racial identity of the artist. We appear to have arrived at a place where the value of a painting cannot be judged properly without our knowing the racial identity of the artist or artists involved. Artistically, intellectually, socially, this doesn't seem a place where we should linger too long.