

# **Transactions and Transformations: artefacts of the wet tropics, North Queensland**

Edited by Shelley Greer, Rosita Henry, Russell McGregor and Michael Wood



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## Transactions and Transformations: artefacts of the wet tropics, North Queensland

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#### COVER

Cover image: Rainforest Shield. Queensland Museum Collection QE246, collected from Cairns 1914.  
Traditional Owners, Yidinji People

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The ARC Discovery project 'Objects of Possession: Artefacts Transactions in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland 1870-2013' research team standing next to some *Bagu* in the Cairns institute.  
Left to Right: Bard Aaberge (PhD candidate on the ARC project), Shelley Greer, Russell McGregor, Maureen Fuary, Trish Barnard, Mike Wood, Corinna Erkenbrecht, Rosita Henry.

# Indigenised Souvenirs and Homewares in the Glenn Cooke Collection

Trish BARNARD

**Barnard, T. 2016. Indigenised Souvenirs and Homewares in the Glenn Cooke Collection. *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum – Culture* 10: 107-115. Brisbane. ISSN 2205-3220**

This paper offers an interpretive evaluation of a collection that was donated to the Queensland Museum by Mr Glenn R. Cooke. The collection consists of 1,395 souvenir tourist objects and items of domestic homeware decorated with indigenised motifs that were manufactured for the Australian market between the 1930s and the 1980s. The motifs on many of the objects are based on traditional designs of rainforest Aboriginal groups from the Wet Tropics of North Queensland, misappropriated by non-Indigenous artists and craft-workers. Research into the sources of the motifs traces the transformation of the original designs into decorative patterns for domestic homeware and tourist products.

□ Glenn Cooke, North Queensland, Indigenous motifs, Wet Tropics, rainforest shields, Indigenised souvenirs

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Australian domestic homeware and souvenir tourist objects featuring Indigenous designs have attracted national and international attention. This paper focuses on a collection of souvenir tourist objects and domestic homewares manufactured for the Australian market from the 1930s to the 1980s. The collection was donated to the Queensland Museum by Glenn Cooke. It consists of 1,395 objects predominantly created by non-Indigenous artisans and collected by Cooke over a period of 30 years. At first glance, the collection appears to be merely an assortment of kitsch objects such as one often sees in second-hand stores today, but these artefacts provide a valuable resource for analysis of the history of appropriation of Aboriginal motifs by non-Indigenous artists and the misrepresentation of Aboriginal cultural forms. My investigation into the genealogy of the Indigenous motifs found on objects that are part of this unique collection reveals a pattern of socially constructed acceptance of the use of Aboriginal motifs and an appropriation phenomenon that is often dismissive of Indigenous cultural contexts. The imagery on the objects creates a disconnection from the original intended purpose of the artefact. The designs have been transformed following a series of transactions involving the traditional owners, the collectors, the non-Indigenous artisans who transformed the designs and the manufacturers who mass produced products for retail. Through a series of transactions, the design taken from a rainforest shield, for example, was transformed into a generic representation of Aboriginal people from the Wet Tropics region.

### GLENN COOKE

Glenn Cooke was raised in country Queensland and combined his passion for history and the arts to complete a Bachelor of Arts degree. From 1981 to 2012 he was the first and only Curator of Decorative Arts at the Queensland Art Gallery, and was later appointed its first Research Curator of Queensland Heritage.

Like many Australians, Cooke developed a familiarity with Aboriginal images through the indigenised designs applied to domestic homewares

and ceramic paraphernalia available in Australia, and he assumed this gave him some understanding of Aboriginal culture. When he undertook a Master of Arts in Museum Studies at George Washington University in America, interpreting representations of Aboriginal Australia, he realised how little he actually knew about Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices. Through his studies and travel Cooke became acutely aware of the popularisation of Indigenous peoples as the exotic other depicted on many souvenir products around the world. He also noted that American postcards and cartoons often represented African Americans as subservient, shoe shine boys, musicians or various other characters and these may have influenced the way Australian artists at this time represented Aboriginal people (figure 1). On his return to Australia in 1980 Cooke became interested in the use of Aboriginal motifs



FIG. 1. E-21305 Card, late 1940s, Queensland Museum Collection.



and decoration produced since the 1930s. In his essay *Kitsch or Kind* he described Australian attitudes of the 1930s:

Aboriginal people and their traditional lifestyles had all but disappeared from the state capitals during the 1930s but as tales of exploration and settlement on the frontiers of Australia's north appeared frequently in popular magazines the image of Aboriginal people took on a distinctly romantic cast. For instance, in the quaintly named Queensland Magazine *The Steering Wheel and Society and Home* an article on 'The most feared and dangerous Aborigines in Australia' appeared in 1933 followed by 'A white man's vengeance' on 'the black devils of the Dawson River' in 1934 while F. E. Baume wrote a serial 'Tragedy track' and provided a series of articles on Aboriginal people over the next few years. Subsequently, in 1939, Charles Broome wrote a 'romance of North Australian wilds' in 'The Blood of Marlee'. I feel sure other magazines would have had a similar incidence of these articles. This was also the time when Charles Chauvel produced his film *Uncivilised*. (Cooke 1995)

So it is no surprise that contemporary imagery stereotyped Aboriginal people, representing them as an exotic race.

## A HISTORY OF APPROPRIATION

Following World War One a heightened sense of national identity was developing and Australians began to develop strong pride and patriotism, while romantically portraying Aboriginal people and their culture at the same time. Artists such as Margaret Preston (1875-1963) had the notion that Aboriginal art would 'cease to be practised in 30 years' and believed 'appropriation thus provided an opportunity for maintaining their art' (Baddeley & Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, 1999: 10). Preston had travelled extensively throughout Europe between 1904 and 1919; she studied arts at various leading

institutions and was inspired by works she had seen from Pablo Picasso's African-influenced period highlighting the exotic cultures. She returned to Australia in 1919 and in 1923 began advocating a national artistic style based on Aboriginal art. Initially Preston applied this principle to craft objects and domestic homewares, and began visits to the Aboriginal collection at the South Australian Museum 'hunting' for aesthetic designs (Edwards et al., 2005: 10). As early as 1925 she encouraged Australian artists to utilize Aboriginal designs before they were misappropriated by artists from other countries. Preston began visits to collections held at the Australian Museum in Sydney searching for aesthetic designs and advocating a national style based on Aboriginal art (Edwards et al., 2005: 10). Frederick McCarthy, Curator of Anthropology and Archaeology at the Australian Museum in Sydney, provided Preston with access to many cultural materials from the Wet Tropics region. One particular rainforest shield held in the Australian Museum was collected from the Mamu people near the Russell River in 1891 and depicted the foot of their major totem, the cassowary. Given present understandings of rainforest shields, we know that this artefact would have had cultural significance for the person to whom it once belonged. After copying the design on the shield, Preston transformed it as a gouache painting on paper and titled it *Aboriginal Design – Design from a Pikan Shield c.1927*. This artwork is now held in the Art Gallery of Western Australia collection (Eagle et al., 2001: 18). *Pikan* is one of the language words for shield from the North Queensland rainforest region.

Claire Baddeley, curator of *Motif and Meaning: Aboriginal Influences in Australian Arts 1930-1970* at the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery in 1999-2000, states that Preston travelled extensively throughout Australia from the 1920s to study Aboriginal art. However, Preston did not visit any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities until a trip to Thursday Island in 1925, followed by a tour of North Queensland in 1927, both of which were a few years after she began collecting designs and adopting Indigenous motifs in her work (Butel, 1986: 11). It is



generally accepted that Preston's transformative intent was to promote Aboriginal art, including that of the rainforest region, and bring it to the attention of other Australian artists and the wider Australian public. However, Elizabeth Butel (1986) expresses concern regarding Preston's artistic transformation of designs that hold cultural significance for the traditional owners and makers of the artefacts. She argues that Preston had contradictory objectives:

Her championing of Aboriginal art was accompanied by a virulent artistic colonialism, which advocated the adoption of Aboriginal methods and ways of seeing but at the same time, denied the culture that gave them meaning. (Butel, 1986: 50)

Preston and other non-Indigenous artists did not seek permission to use the imagery and motifs in their own designs. In fact, they did not attempt to engage with any Aboriginal people at all, despite professing to promote Aboriginal art and cultures. They misappropriated and used Indigenous motifs as a means of making a contribution from the arts to the growth of an Australian national identity. Butel (1986) also notes contradictions in Preston's declarations, made in statements in 1925 and again in 1941, regarding the mythological and religious symbolism associated with Aboriginal artworks. She quotes Preston, who in 1930 stated that, 'the student must be careful not to bother about what myths the carver may have tried to illustrate. Mythology and symbolism do not matter to the artist, only to the anthropologist.' More patronisingly, Preston stated that 'We simply cannot get to the bottom of their minds, it's all just a little too simple for us' (Butel, 1986: 52). Such statements indicate that although Preston was aware of Frederick McCarthy's dictum that Aboriginal art was not just an 'aesthetic impulse', she saw Aboriginal motifs and imagery as a resource for all Australian artists to draw upon and exploit for their own benefit to sanctify their own unique Australian identity.

McCarthy argued that, 'adapted with intelligence and taste, aboriginal art can make a unique contribution to modern Australian enterprise in craft-work'

(cited in Baddeley & Ballarat Fine Art Gallery 1999: 11). During the early 1930s popular books and journal publications were reproducing images of Aboriginal motifs, including unique artefacts from the Wet Tropics, promoting Aboriginal art as decorative design. In 1938 McCarthy published *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art*, which was to become a most useful resource for many artists seeking to copy Indigenous designs and presenting opportunities to capitalize on Aboriginal images that would authenticate objects as Australian.

The appropriation of Aboriginal designs has been a continuing issue for curators and art critics. Some have raised concerns about a blurring of distinctions between 'influence', 'inspiration' 'interpretation', 'appropriation' and 'misappropriation'. (Edwards, Preston, Peel, Mimmocchi, & Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005).

## APPROPRIATION OF RAINFOREST SHIELD DESIGNS

In 1935, just prior to McCarthy's publication of *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art*, images of material collected from the Wet Tropics by anthropologist Ursula McConnel were published in *Oceania* (McConnel, 1935). McConnel's publication 'Inspiration and design in Aboriginal art' also played a major role in the development of Indigenous motifs. A wall hanging from Donald Clark Handcrafts in the Cooke collection (figure 2) features a North Queensland rainforest shield from McConnel's publication. This wall hanging depicts the star fish totem which belongs to the Gunggandji people from Yarrabah near Cairns painted on a shield collected by McConnel and deposited with the South Australian Museum. On a visit to Menmyny Museum in Yarrabah in 2009, I found another Donald Clark wall hanging displayed in a case, which appeared to be a stylised reference to a rainforest shield from this region, but with images of fish (figure 3). I instantly recognised that this shield had been copied from McCarthy's *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art* publication citing the fish totem shield that



FIG. 2. E-20870 Wall hanging, 1954-1958, by Donald Clark Handcrafts, Queensland Museum collection.



FIG. 3. Wall hanging, 1954-1958, by Donald Clark Handcrafts, Menmuna Museum collection, Yarrabah. Photographed by author in September 2011.

is held in the South Australian Museum collection (McCarthy, 1938: 30). Shield designs are featured on many wall hangings produced by commercial operator Donald Clark Handcrafts (1954-1985), which were popular during the 1960s and 1970s with consumers, as if these homewares might allow Aboriginal culture to be absorbed into the home. Franklin proposed that the inclusion of these homewares ‘...ironically planted in their minds the association of Aboriginal culture as an integral part of Australian life and culture and it stayed there owing to its status as a receptacle of memory and biography’ (Franklin, 2010: 202).

Similarly, many ceramic objects in the Cooke collection produced in the 1950s show evidence of designs that can be sourced to McConnell’s 1935 article. This practice of appropriation was encouraged by ceramic studios ‘not fully aware of the spiritual, social and political values intrinsic in Aboriginal art’ (Baddeley & Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, 1999: 3), and some artists were particularly drawn to

the rainforest shield designs illustrated in McConnel (1935). For example, a Gunggandji shield collected by McConnel from the Yarrabah Mission south of Cairns depicts the leaves of a plant used as a cure for nettle sting. This cultural design was simplified and transformed for a motif on a small ceramic egg cup for the Little Sydney Pottery studio during the 1950s (figure 4). It was probably decorated by Lisalotte (Lilo) Pakulski (b.1924) (Johnston, 2002: 21). Within the Cooke collection there are many similar examples of misappropriation, with motifs copied from images of artefacts published in magazines. According to Johnston, Pakulski later admitted to using Aboriginal motifs while at the Little Sydney Pottery studio and said:

I was hesitant about them [using Aboriginal motifs]. But it was what people wanted. I bought a small book from the Museum and studied the photos. I am an artist and do not like the idea of copying the work of others. One lady just copied the serpent motif and made decorations on that theme; I thought that was pretty dreadful. (Johnston, 2002: 86)

Pakulski was one of many European ceramicists who migrated to Australia after World War Two when the Australian Government advocated industrial development and advertised for skilled workers as part of Post-War Reconstruction. Numerous expert ceramicists from Czechoslovakia, Poland and Germany responded, and were employed by Commonwealth Ceramics, operating at Alexandria in Sydney, and other Australian potteries. The appropriation of Aboriginal motifs continued to



FIG. 4. E-20990 Egg cup, 1950s, by the Little Sydney Pottery, Queensland Museum collection.

flourish after their arrival because they quickly started to adapt Indigenous motifs in order to be more Australian (Johnston, 2002: 71). Kathryn Chisholm refers to indigenised ceramics produced between the 1940s and 1960s as 'kitsch crockery', and notes that ceramicists at Martin Boyd Pottery in North Sydney were searching to inject an Australian flavour into the domestic market. They completely transformed the cultural meaning of Indigenous motifs into colourful abstract designs inspired by the interest in Aboriginal art that 'swept the domestic Australian manufacturing market in the decades after World War 2' (Chisholm, 2007: 22).

## INDIGENISED SOUVENIRS

The perfect opportunity to promote Australia presented itself with the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. The Australian airline QANTAS featured Martin Boyd Pottery in their *Airways* magazine, but Florenz Pottery was the only official range chosen by the Olympic Committee (Johnston, 2002: 73). This provided other studios with significant opportunity to produce souvenirs for the multitude of visitors to Australia. The Olympics also generated an increase in sales for Studio Anna, which capitalised on visiting tourists seeking souvenirs with an Australian theme, and 'thus adaptations of Aboriginal cave and bark paintings as well as images of Aboriginal people became popular' (Johnston, 2002: 44, 52). This was an early instance of Australian Aboriginal culture being presented (and misrepresented) to a global market, with the imagery already becoming much hybridised. Until this time, indigenised souvenirs and homewares were still being produced with hand painted motifs as if to imply authenticity. Following the Olympics, many artists capitalised on the popularity of Australia's newfound Indigenous identity. At this time, Aboriginal culture was being transformed, recoded and exoticised as a new quintessential symbol of Australian nationhood. Adrian Franklin states that this implied that 'Aboriginal culture was an integral part of Australian life and culture' (Franklin, 2010: 202).



One ceramicist operating around this time was Latvian-born Gundars Zigurts Lusis (1928-1996) who worked from his parents' garage at Camberwell in the late 1950s under the name of Gunda and produced a huge variety of products that included dishes, vases, bowls, cups, plates, salt and pepper shakers, lamps and ashtrays. His ceramics reflected a new decorative approach with uniquely abstracted graphic designs in the emerging craft movement of the 1950s (figure 5). Franklin (2010: 203) argued that Lusis was 'attempting to include Aboriginal culture in the modern sense of Australia' and borrowed motifs from Aboriginal art to cater for the international tourists attending the Melbourne Olympics in 1956. Such products apparently represented Indigenous Australia and Franklin described them as 'repositories of recognition' that affirmed the presence and repression of Australia's Aboriginal people. In his paper, Franklin cited Richard White as stating that 'eventually they were to reach the indignity of being 'Our Aborigines', their image no longer representative of Australia except as garden ornaments in suburban backyards and ashtrays in souvenir shops' (Franklin, 2010: 198).

The souvenir market and the demand for indigenised ornaments and memorabilia also flourished in North Queensland. During the 1950s, Cairns was fast becoming a destination point for tourists and souvenirs with implied indigeneity and association with local Aboriginal culture were sought after, despite the fact that there was little Aboriginal tourism offered by any operators. The romanticised

images of Aboriginal children generated by Viola Edith Downing (1924-1995), nicknamed Brownie, were mass-produced and presented as appealing and functional souvenirs. Downing once amused herself as a young girl by reading stories about magical fairies from her Balgowlah home north of Sydney. Interestingly, she cultivated her own new world by replacing the fairy characters with 'Aboriginal heroes inspired by her father's collection of books on Aborigines' (Johnston, 2002: 53). Later in 1950 she moved into a shared studio at Circular Quay with a young graduate from East Sydney Technical College named Toni Coles (who married ceramic artist Karel Jungvirt). Downing dabbled in watercolour paintings depicting romanticized images of Aboriginal children inspired by stories from her youth, but later became interested in ceramics after she married Ronald Parsons, who had some marketing experience. They sent her Aboriginal 'Piccaninny' designs to Japan 'where they were mass reproduced as transfers and applied to semi-porcelain wares and imported back into Australia,' where 'people believed they were buying authentic Australian hand painted ceramics because of her signature included into the transfer' (Johnston, 2002: 54). One plate (figure 6) shows a small decal at the top with the words 'Greetings from Cairns'. Any commercial tourist operator could



FIG. 5. E-20989 Dish, 1956, by Gunda, Queensland Museum collection.



FIG. 6. QE-14024 Plate Greetings from Cairns, by Brownie Downing, Queensland Museum collection.

apparently purchase from her catalogue and have their own decal applied, such as this souvenir of Cairns referencing the local Aboriginal people, yet misrepresenting the culture and romanticising and stereotyping the Aboriginal baby as an 'Australian wild child of nature' (Conor, 2009: 13). Conor highlights the fact that ironically these 'recurrent images of happy children in a bush environment' were predominant at a time when the removal of Aboriginal children from their families was at a peak (Conor, 2009: 6).

Cairns and the Wet Tropics region continues to be a tourist mecca with a plethora of indigenised homewares and souvenir products made by non-Indigenous artists available for sale in shops. Such indigenised products could be interpreted as a response to the market demand for a token memento, with little regard for the culture and meaning behind the appropriated motif. The transactions involved in creation and sale of indigenised products made by non-Indigenous artists disadvantages Indigenous artists with respect to the integrity of their cultural representations and opportunities for economic remuneration. Sallie Anderson (2001) argues that the 'widespread perception of Queensland's Aboriginal artists as no longer living a traditional lifestyle creates a situation where the art-buying public views Cairns Aboriginal artists as neither traditional nor contemporary' and that artists are expected to 'negotiate their own identity and artistic style' (Anderson, 2001: 8). Since the launch of the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF) in 2009, consumers are becoming more discerning, with more merchandise, fine art, souvenirs and homewares designed by Indigenous people being exhibited and marketed.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly outlined a history of misappropriation of Aboriginal motifs by non-Indigenous artists and makers in Australia through an exploration of a particular collection. Objects from this collection present an interesting narrative of transactions and acquisitions of designs from the 1930s to the 1970s that mispresent Aboriginal culture through the misappropriation of Aboriginal motifs. Within the cultural framework that prevailed from the 1930s to the 1970s, most non-Indigenous artists sincerely believed that they were promoting Aboriginal Australia. However, their use of motifs was a form of misappropriation, because they did not have permission to use the images nor did they engage with any Aboriginal people; rather, the use of Indigenous motifs was promoted as an expression of national identity. Today, Aboriginal artists are reclaiming their rights to reproduce their own artefacts and designs. The annual Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF), for example, now aims to present authentically made Indigenous arts and crafts in an ethical market place.

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