



Media Release

15 October 2002

**The Art Gallery of South Australia and
the South Australian Museum Present**

The Art of Arnhem Land

20 October 2002 – 23 February 2003

This new exhibition, **Art of Arnhem Land 1940s – 1970s** charts the emergence of Aboriginal bark paintings from the sphere of anthropological interest, as artefacts, into the public domain as a powerful form of contemporary art.

Drawn entirely from the Art Gallery of South Australia's collection, and shown concurrently with the South Australian Museum's **Art of Arnhem Land 1948 – 1952**, the exhibitions together showcase one of the largest collections of bark paintings from the early **Mountford** expedition in existence.

Recently completed research on the works has also identified several rare early pieces by leading artists, including those who became celebrated precursors of the Aboriginal Land Rights movement.

The majority of the works in the exhibition come from *Yirrkala*, *Oenpelli* and *Groote Eylandt* and were originally collected during Australia's largest international scientific expedition, National Geographic Society's *American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land* (ASSEAL) which departed from Adelaide on 18 March 1948 led by the South Australian ethnologist, Charles P. Mountford.

Among the twenty-five tons of material collected during this nine-month expedition were nearly 500 bark paintings, many of which were later distributed (in 1956) by the Commonwealth Government to all major Australian state art galleries and museums.

The Art Gallery of South Australia was privileged to receive 34 Commonwealth gifts from ASSEAL - more than any other art institution. Through additional gifts from *Charles Mountford* the collection grew to 59 works by 1962. Collected by *Mountford* during his three expeditions to Arnhem Land (1948, 1949, 1952) it is one of the largest art gallery collections of this early material in existence.

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These were the first Aboriginal works collected in the field and accepted by public art galleries, not only for their ethnographic significance, but also for their aesthetic qualities. These paintings from Arnhem Land now form the foundation of most state gallery Aboriginal art collections.

This exhibition also spans an important period of political change for Aboriginal people. These rare early paintings by senior artists such as Mawalan Marika and Munggurawuy Yunupingu (the father of Mandawuy Yunupingu—best known as the founder and lead singer of the contemporary rock group Yothu Yindi) relate to title ownership of land and gave momentum to the land rights movement thirty years later. These senior artists, and others included in this exhibition, collaborated in the painting of the historic 1963 Bark Petition which was pivotal in the enactment in 1976 of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act.

Shadowing the rise of Modernism in Australia, during the 1940s and the 1950s, the bark painting tradition inspired and influenced important Australian modernist artists such as *Margaret Preston, Ian Fairweather, James Cant* and *Tony Tuckson*. By the 1970s, a strong market for these works had developed, and bark painting was recognised as a dynamic form of contemporary Australian art.

The Art of Arnhem Land: 1940s – 1970s comprises approximately eighty-nine works.

Art of Arnhem Land: 1948-1952 comprises more than sixty bark paintings, thirty wooden carvings and a unique collection of beeswax figurines.

Art of Arnhem Land 1940s – 1970s
20 October 2002 – 23 February 2003

Art Gallery of South Australia North Terrace, Adelaide Open 10 am – 5 pm every day

www.artgallery.sa.gov.au

Admission to the **Art of Arnhem Land 1940s – 1970s** is by gold coin donation.

A range of activities including guided tours, film screenings, an extensive schools and school holiday art and craft program will complement the exhibition.

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