



THE UNIVERSITY  
OF QUEENSLAND  
AUSTRALIA



# AGENCY AND LEGACY

a critical essay



# QUEENSLAND ABORIGINAL CREATIONS

## a critical understanding

### Queensland Aboriginal Creations, better known as

QAC, was the marketing arm of the Department of Native Affairs for decades and had a direct hand in facilitating the mass production of a range of works for sale for the tourist industry. In the beginning,

this heavy handed approach reflected a practice of importing mediums and artefacts from outside the State as hallmarks of a pan-Aboriginal ideal. For several decades QAC promoted and even demanded outlandish breaches of cultural copyright and Queensland Aboriginal artists complied with these demands. However, this is not the complete story. To focus on the cultural appropriation of QAC's history – and to negatively look down on the artists producing these works as well as the works themselves – is to ignore a much more complicated relationship between the State and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people residing within its control. Over 170 works in *Agency and Legacy* are reconsidered in light of this complexity, foregrounding the agency, creativity and innovative spirit of the artists who made them.

Scholars in the community as well as the academy have documented the continuous production of artefacts for many communities across Queensland, despite the cultural disruptions and upheavals of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>1</sup> However, beginning in the 1930s, the Queensland state government began to encourage the production of artefacts as a source of economic viability. Queensland was not alone in this approach of linking cultural arts to commercial markets and the creation of QAC sits amidst a broader trend in world Indigenous affairs.

The 1930s saw a major philosophical shift between governing structures and Indigenous populations around the world. This philosophy was one which sought the improvement of

dispossessed Indigenous populations with a reintroduction of cultural material to be produced for commoditisation. Prime examples of these efforts are the programs developed in Canada and the United States for the production of cultural material by the Inuit and Pueblo communities, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Cultural arts were seen as the solution. Ironically, the logic was that after generations of removing people from their cultural traditions, the solution was to 'reintroduce culture' as a way of improving upon poverty and community conflict caused by the very processes of dispossession. It is important to note that culture was used in a very limited and targeted way. In no example mentioned does the revival of culture include the reintroduction or creation of language programs or the establishment of any form of religious ceremonial life. There was no focus on traditional food harvesting or any understanding or accommodation of kinship obligations or structures. There was no talk about land usage, ownership, or hand back. The revival of culture included only those things which were marketable and unthreatening to established power relations.

QAC officially launched in 1959 but was merely an articulation of ideologies and practices established decades earlier. J W Bleakley, the Chief Protector of Aborigines from 1914 to 1942, had spent decades encouraging and providing outlets for the production, display and sale of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material culture. Orders for boomerangs were frequently sent to the Queensland Department of Native Affairs throughout the year, from both domestic and international universities and museums as well as school-age students, aficionados and collectors. The demography of the people and institutions requesting Indigenous curios was



Above: Connie Richards and Peter Faulkes  
Stoneware pot  
Yarrabah  
Courtesy of the Queensland Museum Collection







Bark painting by unknown Brisbane artist  
UQ Anthropology Museum Collection

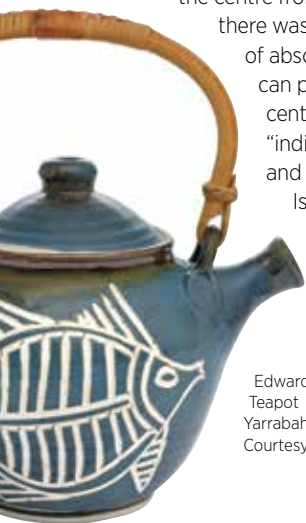
varied and international and included Germany, France, Italy, the United States, Canada, Mexico and Japan as far back as the 1940s.<sup>3</sup> Government officials in Brisbane assumed authority on how these artefacts were supposed to be made including sending instructions to communities on how to make a 'proper' boomerang. The State's mandates and expectations on Indigenous artefacts superseded Indigenous interpretations.

The move towards developing and supporting the curio industry in Queensland was well and truly underway by the 1950s. Enough requests were now circulating to foster H. R. Pascoe's expedition to the Far North of the state. Pascoe was the "former manual arts training teacher" from Cherbourg.<sup>4</sup> He could well be considered the 'father' of QAC, as the very first manager of the department he carried out most of the initial legwork to get the organisation up and running and funded. In December 1958, Pascoe left Brisbane for Thursday Island on the *M.V. Waiben* for the purposes of "examining the potential market for native curios on the Queensland Coast and in Thursday Island and to arrange, where possible and practicable, the manufacture of these articles to meet public demand".<sup>5</sup>

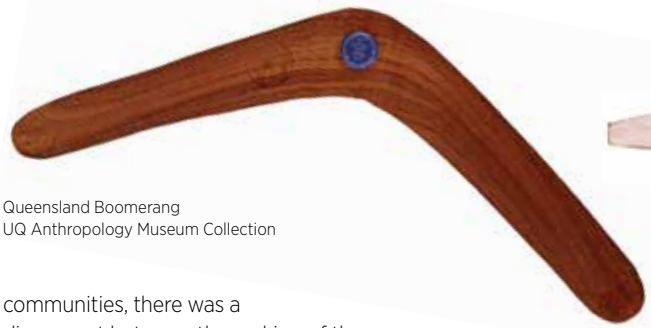
In Pascoe's subsequent report he claimed that: tourists islands are "lacking in articles attractive in design and representative of Queensland industry and life"; Townsville had few opportunities for the "disposal of native creations" while Cairns was considered "the centre from which our articles could be distributed";

there was a local market in North Queensland "capable of absorbing every type of article that our scheme can produce"; and Cherbourg would be the main centre for manufacturing due to the Settlement's "individual control, proximity of available markets, and the lack of isolation" as compared to Thursday Island.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the best of intentions to develop economic opportunities for Indigenous



Edward Deemera  
Teapot  
Yarrabah  
Courtesy of the Queensland Museum Collection



Queensland Boomerang  
UQ Anthropology Museum Collection

communities, there was a disconnect between the making of these items in mass quantities and additional stipulations that the articles "not be modernised". In a memo from 2 September 1959, a list of requested stock items was made in preparation for the cruise liner *Mariposa's* arrival. It reads in part:

*All authentic looking weapons etc., such as shields, woomeras, stone axes, native headdresses, spears (one type in particular), nulla nullas, killer boomerangs. A suggested quantity would be 60 of each. It is stressed that these articles should not be modernised in any way.*<sup>7</sup>

The reason for mass-production was evident in the large-scale public demand for artefacts and boomerangs and QAC was seen as the major point of sale for companies across the country and indeed the world. But the additional need for these objects to also be 'authentic' and 'traditional' – whilst produced en masse and delivered on time – denies the usual way in which these objects were crafted in the first place. There were other issues Aboriginal and Torres Strait artists had to contend with in participating in this new economic opportunity.

QAC is today infamously remembered for importing Arnhem Land bark paintings into Queensland and across the communities and settlements for copying and selling. Although quite easy to demonise this today, when the practice started, there was very little understanding of regional difference, cultural copyright or the

Barambah Pottery  
Jug and cup set  
Cherbourg  
Courtesy of the Queensland Museum Collection





Far left: Boomerang  
Mornington Island  
UQ Anthropology Museum Collection

ownership of stories and designs as we are now familiar with them. The movers and shakers of these policies were bureaucrats – not Aboriginal elders and craftspeople or even anthropologists or art historians.

The production of bark paintings happened in Queensland through the production of bark blanks. If Cherbourg was to be the boomerang factory of Queensland as Pascoe had set up, then Hope Vale was to become the producer of bark blanks. 'Blanks' were collected and cured in Hope Vale and then shipped to Brisbane for distribution among the local artists for painting. Hope Vale also produced bark blanks for Mornington Island and their local artists to paint which were then shipped to Brisbane for sale. The archives reflect a hesitancy to allow Hope Vale to paint their own barks – it was too expensive for QAC and Mornington Island bark paintings "sold better". However, *Agency and Legacy* is fortunate enough to have some Hope Vale bark paintings on exhibit. These paintings reflect not only the artistic styles and creativity of the community but forms of resistance to QAC bureaucracies as well.

So what did the urban-based artists choose to paint? In the beginning, there was very little choice at all. Once in Brisbane, blanks were painted by local Aboriginal people who used templates imported from the Northern Territory. Photographs of bark paintings were imported from Arnhem Land into Queensland for copying and sale in the late sixties and into the seventies. The concept of painting somebody else's culture is anathema to today's understandings of Aboriginal cultural protocols.

There is another perspective complicating the bark painting production at QAC. The shopfront at George Street was one of very few places where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture was on active and proud display as a living, contemporary mode of expression and not as a relic of past times. Despite the controversial content, the works at QAC allowed for an active Indigenous presence in the heart of Brisbane.

Other production hubs which were rather famous during this time are the pottery studios. Objects made include vases, pitchers, mugs, cups and saucers as well as ashtrays and

Left: Garth Murgha and Estelle Tranby  
Boomerang  
Cairns  
Private collection

candlesticks. Two of the studios – Cherbourg and Yarrabah – had distinct styles which made them particular to those communities. Cherbourg pottery generally had painted on designs and motifs as the main method of decoration. The designs used to decorate the surfaces of pottery in the Yarrabah Studio were not painted but incised with deeply grooved lines which were then painted with a different glaze colour than the body of the piece. The interior decoration of the animals – repeated lines, some cross-hatching and what could potentially be seen as a spine – give some allusion to the x-ray style of bark painting which would have been copied regularly through the painting of barks. Despite the potential influences from the bark painting industry on to the style of the pottery's subject matter, the fauna are all local to the community: turtles, crocodiles, barramundi, lizards/goannas, dugongs and the occasional kangaroo.

Around the 1980s is where the story of QAC ends in published accounts:<sup>8</sup> outrageously imported and copied Arnhem Land barks, scandals of cultural copyright, boomerang factories, and the exploitation of Aboriginal culture into sentimental kitsch, such as ashtrays, candleholders and vases. There is more to QAC's story than this and arguably, the very best years of QAC were actually just beginning.

John Conroy, like J. W. Bleakley decades before, spent considerable time in the Torres Strait region before heading down to Brisbane to manage the QAC shop in 1987. Further, Conroy saw "huge potential and opportunity for Indigenous communit[ies] to have a retail outlet". What Conroy did

Garth Murgha and Estelle Tranby  
Shadow box  
Cairns  
Private collection



not know of anthropology or art history, he made up for in retail experience and direct contact and experience with remote Indigenous life and people.

As manager, Conroy saw the failings of past policy choices by QAC and explains what it was like, coming into that environment:

*... a lot of southeast Queensland Indigenous people were removed from their culture, and they were being compared to people from Central Australia and Milingimbi who had cultural maintenance and contact over the years. What was happening in Central Australia with the production of dot paintings and the recognition and financial gains, the people here I felt aspired as Indigenous people to use their skills to achieve recognition and income. They wanted to work, but they had been removed to a large degree from cultural contact. Prior to my coming to Aboriginal Creations, that issue was addressed by giving people a copy of Milingimbi works. So I knew enough about those things from working in the Cape, so I got all those photos and cut them up and got rid of them.*

QAC artist, Roslyn Serico, talks about other changes Conroy was trying to implement at QAC. She talks about how Conroy did away with the ordering system and encouraged Aboriginal artists to paint their own material.

*John Conroy made us paint for ourselves. Before he came in that's when all the big noise came about that Queensland artists were copying [Northern] Territory art. John Conroy was the one who said, I am sending you some barks, paint me something. No more of this number Twenty. I want you to do something yourself. So I got about it like I would like to paint a kangaroo and I do a kangaroo and it sold and that encouraged me. John was very good, he is the main person that encouraged black artists in Brisbane and worked through QAC to do their own thing.<sup>9</sup>*

Aside from scrapping the tradition of copying, instead of

making attempts to get artists to paint for themselves, Conroy also opened up a gallery for the first time in QAC's history. Conroy describes how he had to obtain the space for the gallery.

*Next to QAC there was an archival store. I tried on many occasions to get that space as a gallery. The opportunity came when Colleen Wall and Shirley Macnamara came down from Mt Isa – about 7 or 8 Indigenous ladies finishing up an arts course and they had to have an exhibition.*

*...You open it [the ladies said]. Oh no, you want somebody who's pretty well known. The teacher [they answered]. No bigger. And then eventually they said, what about the Premier and I said yes! Good idea! Write a letter to the Premier. And they wrote directly to the Premier and he said I'd love to open your exhibition.... in 3 weeks, the archival store was emptied and there you go.<sup>10</sup>*

The gallery was an important venue in Brisbane for Aboriginal and Islander artists. It was a professional space for artists to display their work but one relaxed enough to be obtainable. A lot of the early Torres Strait Islander print work was displayed for the first time there as well as Lockhart River artists and other northern Queensland artists.

In talking with people who had first-hand knowledge of QAC, it is clear that there is another aspect of the shop which its sensationalised history has tended to gloss over. There was in fact a community art centre aspect to QAC which, despite its government mandate and entrenched arts practices, was very much a reality. Since the 1970s, QAC had in place a form of profit sharing whereby end of year profits were divided up among participating artists. During Conroy's time, the end of year bonus coincided with a massive Christmas party. Conroy kept a record of people and artists and buyers who attended their gallery openings and would invite everybody on the list to the shop. Artists around Brisbane remembers those events as fun, social times where the entire Aboriginal community would gather and celebrate.

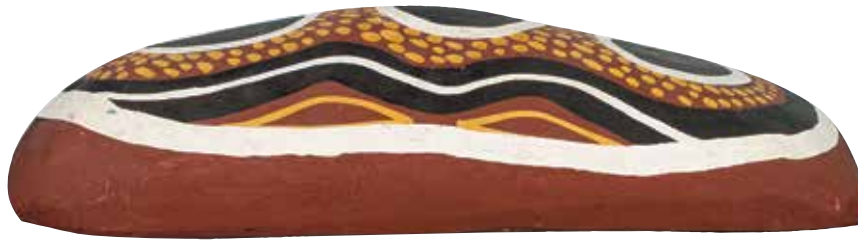
With regards to purchasing artworks, QAC had an open-door policy where any Indigenous artists could submit work for sale or consignment. Conroy had a fixed budget and would have

Florence Gutchen  
Necklace  
Darnley Island  
Private collection



Shell necklace  
Bamaga  
UQ Anthropology Museum Collection





Shield  
UQ Anthropology Museum  
Collection

to buy works not only from Brisbane artists who would come to the shop but from the communities who would submit works as well. From sales facilitated by QAC, houses were bought, children were put through school and livelihoods were maintained.

*Agency and Legacy* illustrates creativity, innovation and push-back to some of the more draconian policies and cultural appropriation approaches earlier versions of QAC put forward. It must also be noted that the objects on display represent dozens and dozens of Aboriginal people who were able to spend their lives expressing themselves through their artistic abilities while also making a living doing it.

QAC left behind a massive legacy of artefacts, artworks and stories. QAC works are included in several major museum collections across Australia and private international collections. Much of what is included in *Agency and Legacy* is due to the collecting determination of John Conroy and Michael Aird. Conroy, through his position as manager, and Aird, as a curator at the Queensland Museum, saw each object as a representation of someone's personal and individual story of Indigenous expression. Aird personally collected the QAC shop signs, recognising both their historical and cultural value. Conroy's diligent collecting of pottery was based on a desire to see these significant pieces stay in the country instead of travelling home with overseas tourists. Also included in *Agency and Legacy* are several contemporary pieces. These works highlight the legacy of QAC and the artists who are able to continue to make their living expressing their own individual cultural stories. Beautifully crafted pottery is once again being made in Yarrabah and Cherbourg with the revival of the pottery studios. Painted and carved boomerangs are still being lovingly crafted by Queensland artists, and sold to tourists to take home and enjoy.

The University of Queensland is fortunate to have these works on display at the Anthropology Museum for audiences to explore these legacies of artistic production and the Indigenous agencies that created them.

### Gretchen Stolte

#### Endnotes

- 1 Peterson, N. L. Allen and L. Hamby (eds), 2008, *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press
- 2 Detailed in Burton, H.K, 1936, *The Re-Establishment of the Indians in Their Pueblo Life through the Revival of Their Traditional Crafts: A Study in Home Extension Education*, New York, Teachers College, Columbia University; and Potter, K. K. 1999, 'James Houston, Armchair Tourism, and the Marketing of Inuit Art', in W Jackson Rushing, III (ed.), *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers, Meanings, Histories*, 39-56, New York: Routledge
- 3 Queensland State Archives Item ID336666 and Item ID336929, *Correspondence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Further details: summary of multiple letters of correspondence across both files. See particularly a letter from the Mexican Consul for "certain Australian novelties suitable for gift purposes" dated 05 April 1939.*
- 4 Butler, S., 2003 'Cape York's Time in Motion', in Queensland Art Gallery, (ed.), *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, 192-199, South Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery.
- 5 Queensland State Archives Item ID502314, *Correspondence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Further details: 19 December 1959 report from H.R. Pascoe to the Chief Protector.*
- 6 *ibid.* Further details: 15th January 1959 report from H.R. Pascoe to the Chief Protector.
- 7 Queensland State Archives Item ID502314, *Correspondence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Further details: 2 September 1959 memorandum for the files.*
- 8 Kleinert, S. & M. Neal, 2000, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Anderson, S. 2001, 'The Aboriginal Art Industry in Cairns, Queensland: An Ethnographic Study', PhD thesis, School of Archaeology and Anthropology, The Australian National University, Canberra; Demozay, M., 2001, *Gatherings II: Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art from Queensland, Australia*, Southport: Keeaira Press.
- 9 Aird, M., 2001, *Brisbane Blacks*, Southport: Keeaira Press.
- 10 Personal Communication, 01 September 2011.



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Cover: Queensland Aboriginal Creations tag attached to Morningside Island scoop net  
UQ Anthropology Museum Collection

UQ Anthropology Museum 2020  
Photos of UQ and private collections by Carl Warner, photos of Queensland Museum  
collections by Mick Richards