

NIKITA VANDERBYL

William Barak's paintings at State Library Victoria

Introduction

The beat of clap sticks and possum-skin drums fills the air as rows of warriors dance and sing in time to the percussion. Two bright fires glow in the centre of this gathering; nearby the director of ceremonies takes centre stage, wrapped in his possum-skin cloak. This is the scene of celebration presented in a painting by Aboriginal Australian artist William Barak (c. 1824–1903). The artwork in State Library Victoria's care has been executed in blue pigment, red ochre and black charcoal on a canvas of thick cardboard. Barak applied the paint so thickly that it stands out in three dimensions, like that of an Impressionist work. Another painting, which uses the same thick card as a canvas, also depicts a scene of grouped figures wearing cloaks. Instead of dancing, they stand tall, holding jagged spears and other weapons. A kangaroo and an emu are present; the figures wear lyre bird feathers in their hair: to this observer the painting shows hunting and social arrangements within the community.

State Library Victoria (hereafter referred to as the Library) holds three artworks by Barak which are masterful examples of his style and his treatment of the subject of ceremony, also called 'corroboree' (two on pages 22–23). The third artwork presents a different style, being more accurately described as a drawing, which combines the subjects of ceremony and animals in a composition of many figures and possibly multiple narratives (pages 8–9).

Talma & Co., *Barak, Chief of the Yarra Yarra Tribe [Barak Drawing a Corroboree]*, photographic print, gelatin silver, c. 1898, Pictures Collection, H91.258





William Barak, *Dancing scene*,
charcoal and watercolour on paper
mounted on cloth, 1880s, Pictures
Collection, H3725



Barak painted images of ceremony and other aspects of life that he remembered from before European invasion and the colonisation of Australia's south-east. These included tools and weapons of daily use, many ceremonies with animals, less frequently fight scenes and scenes of conflict resolution, and two landscapes. With their highly original manner and use of a combination of Aboriginal Australian and European materials, Barak's paintings are very significant among images of 19th-century Aboriginal people of Victoria and are regarded as pioneering in the history of post-invasion Aboriginal art.¹

William Barak was a Wurundjeri man of the Kulin nation, which is composed of five language groups: Wurundjeri, Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungerong and Wathaurong. The Wurundjeri people take their name from the Woiwurrung-language words *wurun*, meaning the manna gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*), and *djeri*, the grub which is found in or near the tree. Bunjil, the Wedge-tailed Eagle, is the creator of the Kulin peoples; he is one significant moiety ancestor, and Waa, the Crow, is the other.

Though the estimated 51 existing paintings and drawings of Barak's oeuvre are significant because they record his memories of Wurundjeri life and stories from before the Europeans' arrival, they also provide insights into the relations between European and Aboriginal people in the late 19th century. Provenance information is often limited, as is the case with the three artworks discussed here. However, by piecing together Barak's relationships with a diverse range of visitors to Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve, where he lived, it is possible to contextualise his artworks and understand his actions in greater depth. His friends and acquaintances included artists, settlers and pastoralists who had been born in Scotland, Switzerland and Portugal, among other locations, and who had settled in or frequently visited the Healesville region, north-east of Melbourne. Not only do these relationships provide provenance details; they add to our understanding of Barak's diplomacy. It has been argued that Barak sought to preserve Kulin culture and to do so utilised available European materials and navigated colonial power structures.² Tourist visitation at Coranderrk is just one example. During the 1880s and 1890s, after the tumultuous period of the Coranderrk rebellion – when the community campaigned for recognition of its right to occupy and control its land – Barak met international and local anthropologists, governors and other visitors through whom he was able to ensure the preservation of his paintings and, in one instance, three of his people's songs.³

In this article I contextualise the three artworks held by the Library through a discussion of Barak's relationships with key individuals and the circulation and reception of his paintings in general. By focusing on Barak's

friendships and meetings with different individuals throughout his life, my aim is to highlight the ways in which he navigated the rapidly changing world of the settler colony in Victoria, adopting and appropriating where possible those strategies in performance and diplomacy which presented opportunities to preserve examples of Kulin culture and communicate across the cultural divide. The name given to this proficiency in concepts is 'imperial literacy', and, as I argue here, this is what Barak practised.⁴

Coranderk

Barak was 11 or 12 years old in 1835 when his world was cataclysmically changed by the arrival of Europeans at what became Port Phillip and then Melbourne. In 1837, as a young man, Barak attended the government's Yarra Mission School, run by missionary George Langhorne.⁵ He joined the Native Police of the Port Phillip District in 1844 under the guidance of his uncle, the leader (or *Ngurungaeta*) Billibellary (c. 1799–1846). Curator Carol Cooper suggested that rather than thinking of Aboriginal people's involvement with the police force only as a brutalising experience in which Aboriginal men witnessed the corruption of white officers, it can also be seen that 'those who joined and stayed saw a future for themselves in the changed world of European presence'.⁶ Historian Marie Hansen Fels also emphasised the suggestion that in a situation not of their own making, with the incursion of foreigners and unknown animals into their lands, the men who joined the police acted to advance their own interests.⁷ From 1839 to 1849 the Port Phillip Protectorate attempted to impose Christianity and, with it, European notions of civilisation upon the Aboriginal people of south-east Victoria. Four assistant protectors of Aborigines were sent from England for this purpose (although once they arrived in their districts they found themselves taken into an Aboriginal world, and achieving these goals proved elusive).⁸ In the regions around Melbourne on Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung lands, William Thomas, an assistant protector from London, came to know the Kulin peoples well and was one of the few new arrivals to learn their language fluently. His journals and those of his colleagues record early exchanges of material objects.⁹ Possum-skin cloaks, baskets and the intricately carved weapons of Kulin warriors were traded, stolen or otherwise acquired by Europeans during this period, some eventually finding their way to ethnographic collections.¹⁰

Thomas became an ally and friend to the Kulin and in 1859 began advocating on their behalf to secure, in their words, 'a block of land in the country where they may sit down, plant corn, potatoes ... and work like white men'.¹¹ Barak's cousin and *Ngurungaeta* Simon Wonga led this movement, which eventually

secured the establishment of a farming community at the confluence of the Yarra River and Badger Creek, named Coranderrk for the flowering 'Christmas bush' (*Prostanthera lasianthos*) native to the area.¹² The land they chose was Barak and Wonga's by inheritance. With the support of Scottish Presbyterian lay preacher John Green and his wife, Mary, the community flourished and was, by the mid-1870s, close to self-sufficient. The sale of baskets, fire-lighting tools and boomerangs, alongside possum-skin rugs for a time, provided a significant proportion of the residents' income.¹³

As photographs taken during this period show, the land was successfully cleared for farming, cottages were built, and cattle grazed – all with minimal support from the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (hereafter BPA), charged with managing the affairs of the colony's six missions and reserves. As Indigenous social researcher Professor Barry Judd noted, the Coranderrk pioneers' 'decision to integrate into the economic order of British colonialism through uptake of settled agriculture needs to be seen as a strategic decision during the 1860s and 1870s'.¹⁴ The illustration on page 13, opposite, shows an engraving taken from a photograph illustrating Aboriginal participation in the local economy; it was used by politicians and missionaries as evidence of their supposed success at 'civilising' and Christianising the Aboriginal Australian population.¹⁵ The residents used the income from their handcrafted wares to purchase essentials not provided by the BPA, and they took pride in these activities.

This hard-won prosperity did not last. Local settlers observed Coranderrk's success and sought to profit themselves from its agriculture. The BPA, sympathetic to these men and citing supposed dangers to the health of the Aboriginal residents as the reason, recommended the sale of the station, urging its closure and the removal of the residents to the Murray River region, in the north of the colony. In 1875 John Green was removed for refusing to countenance moving the Coranderrk residents or for supporting the thinly veiled attempt of local settlers to take Coranderrk.¹⁶ A succession of incompetent managers was instated.

Barak was by that time the *Ngurungaeta*, after the death of Simon Wonga. Together with his aides Thomas Dunolly and Robert Wandon, he led numerous deputations and co-ordinated a paper war against the BPA. The Coranderrk rebellion, as it became known, culminated in a parliamentary inquiry in 1881 which interviewed Aboriginal witnesses, the first inquiry to do so in colonial Australia.¹⁷ This history was recently brought to the stage in the La Mama production of verbatim theatre called *Coranderrk: we will show the country* (the culmination of a collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous



Samuel Calvert, *Hawkers at the Aboriginal Station, Coranderrk*, wood engraving (after a photograph by Fred Kruger), published in the *Illustrated Australian News*, 12 June 1876, p. 108, Illustrated Newspaper File, IAN10/07/76/108

researchers, education experts, community members, and government and community organisations called the Minutes of Evidence project). *Coranderrk* presented Barak as a diplomat and leader, the story with which general audiences are most familiar.¹⁸

During the years following the Coranderrk rebellion, Barak began painting, and it was at this time that he emerged as an artist. Coranderrk was made a permanent reservation, safe from settler interference, in 1884, by Victoria's chief secretary Graham Berry, allowing Barak to devote time to other concerns. His second wife, Annie (from Euston on the lower Murray River, at the north of the colony), and son David suffered from health problems due to the increasingly poor living conditions at Coranderrk, which were caused by the BPA's ongoing negligence.¹⁹ Annie and David died in July and August 1881 from a tuberculosis epidemic which swept the settlement.

In 1882 and 1884 Barak took the opportunity to travel to Gippsland, in the east of the colony, to meet anthropologist Alfred William Howitt, who became a friend during this period. They discussed Wurundjeri customs, beliefs and kinship structure, producing 70 pages of documentation.²⁰ Howitt was an explorer and natural scientist who worked as a police magistrate on the lands of the Gunai people (now Gunaikurnai) in Gippsland; he became an authority on Aboriginal (specifically Gunaikurnai) culture. Barak became a key informant on the Wurundjeri community and was cited by Howitt 35 times in

his 1904 publication *The Native Tribes of South-east Australia*, and further in his articles published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*.²¹ Howitt became a pioneer of Australian anthropology through a technique he developed with colleague Lorimer Fison during the late 19th century.²²

Carol Cooper noted that Barak ‘must have felt a sense of relief at leaving his grief and difficulties at Coranderrk behind him’. He found in Howitt someone willing to listen and record his knowledge of culture, and their discussions about the ceremonies which formed the subject of Barak’s paintings could have stimulated Barak’s creativity.²³ It was after these conversations that Barak began painting; none of his known works are dated prior to 1885.

A ready audience of local excursionists visiting the Yarra Ranges purchased paintings, drawings and handmade weapons and tools from Barak over the following two decades. From the 1870s onwards, a growing number of Victorians had travelled out of the city on day trips to experience the picturesque wonders of nature. This included the giant tree ferns and waterfalls of the Dandenong Ranges and, further afield, the Gippsland Lakes. As scholars have pointed out, a visit to ‘see the natives’ became a popular component of these tours.²⁴

Friendship and provenance

Barak met many visitors over these years and became a well-known storyteller, demonstrating his boomerang throwing or fire lighting for dignitaries and day trippers alike.²⁵ He found friendships among neighbouring families and visiting dignitaries. For example, Governor Henry Brougham Loch (in office in Victoria in 1884–89) left word that Barak was always to be admitted at Government House. In 1887 the governor received a painting from Barak in lieu of a corroboree that had highly interested him but had been prevented from taking place by the BPA.²⁶ Barak, who informed Alfred Howitt that his status as *Ngurungaeta* was like that of a governor for his people, regarded these relationships diplomatically, and his artworks became an important part of his diplomacy.

As Coranderrk was the closest of Victoria’s reserves to Melbourne, Barak became increasingly known to visitors. Ethel Shaw, the daughter of Joseph Shaw, Coranderrk’s superintendent from 1884 to 1909, recalled some of these encounters. In addition to greeting visitors, Barak was often invited to Government House with fellow Coranderrk resident Dick Richards (1838–1907) to meet visiting governors from other colonies; following one such occasion Shaw wrote that ‘after lunching with the Vice-Regal party, all went

into the garden for an exhibition of boomerang and spear throwing, also fire-making'. On their return to Coranderrk, Richards and Barak would recount the visit for the other residents, and Barak 'used to chuckle with amusement when describing the efforts of their Excellencies to throw the boomerang'.²⁷

Barak sold his paintings to visitors who were enthusiastic about viewing demonstrations of Kulin culture. Many of these have inscriptions indicating their date of purchase and featuring the artist's name; he was often referred to as 'King Barak the last chief of the Yarra Yarra tribe and his race'.²⁸ In spite of the fatalism of this title, Barak used what recognition he had during his life to ensure the survival of a record of Kulin culture through his artworks. The friendships he made can be viewed as central to the survival of many of his paintings and drawings.

Among the visitors to Coranderrk were local settlers who became Barak's friends for many years. One such family was the de Purys, who had left Neuchâtel in Switzerland and arrived in Victoria in the early 1850s.²⁹ Their reasons for leaving Switzerland related to social unrest following revolutions across Europe in 1848. The choice of Melbourne was influenced by the family's contact with Victoria's first lieutenant-governor, Charles La Trobe: brothers Guillaume and Samuel de Pury were nephews of Sophie La Trobe (née de Montmollin, 1808–1854).³⁰ Charles La Trobe's favourable reports on the potential for winegrowing in the Yarra Valley had influenced their decision to settle in Victoria. Guillaume had bought a property between Healesville and Lilydale in 1863, naming it Yeringberg and starting a vineyard. Coranderrk and Yeringberg were neighbours, prospering at the same time. Coranderrk residents were employed picking grapes on the adjacent de Pury property, and Barak was a frequent visitor, sometimes taking Guillaume's sons Victor and George hunting for two or three days at a time. When George travelled to Switzerland for schooling, Barak recalled the brothers' skills to their mother, Ada, who wrote to George quoting Barak: 'Him Yarra blackfellow ... track men like blackfellow'.³¹

Barak's friendship with the de Pury family also encompassed conversations and painting sessions and provides clues to his development as a painter. In July 1899, on one of his visits to Yeringberg, Barak sat for a portrait painted by Victor de Pury and Victor's tutor the Portuguese painter Artur Loureiro (1853–1932). Loureiro was among the founding members of the Victorian Artists Society, an organisation for the advancement and exhibition of fine art in Victoria, which also included the de Purys' neighbour from Neuchâtel, winegrower, writer and painter Charles Hubert de Castella (1825–1907) and another local known to Barak: Scottish painter John Mather (1848–1916).

Though their names have not attracted the same notoriety as those of some of their contemporaries at the artists society – Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder – Loureiro, Mather, de Pury and de Castella belonged to a group of painters connected to Healesville who knew and conversed about painting with Barak. Barak would often sit in on Victor de Pury's lessons with Loureiro, and it has been suggested that he received advice and painting materials through this connection.³²

In 2015 the Yarra Ranges Regional Museum in Lilydale displayed an exhibition documenting Barak's relationship with the de Purys. *Oil Paint and Ochre* used recently donated material from the de Pury family archive to bring attention to this little-known chapter in Barak's life and effectively present an overview of this important relationship, which gives rich context to the production of several of Barak's paintings. The most well known of these is of the de Pury vineyard painted in around 1898. One of only two landscapes painted by Barak, this one was gifted to Samuel de Pury after he returned permanently to Switzerland. (The second is in a private collection.)³³ Barak had a message inscribed on the painting to remind Samuel that he would not forget him. The painting ensured that in Neuchâtel Barak would not be forgotten either. The de Purys and their friends acquired four more paintings by Barak, which now reside in the Musée d'ethnographie, Neuchâtel.³⁴ (Other artworks by Barak are held by ethnographic museums in Berlin, Dresden and Herrnhut, Germany.) This example shows how Barak's friendships were instrumental in the preservation of his artworks and the circumstances of their transportation overseas.

Another relationship that Barak developed was with the aforementioned artist John Mather, who emigrated to Victoria in 1878. Mather was involved in the Melbourne art scene and regularly painted *en plein air*, participating in the artists camps which launched the Impressionist movement (or Heidelberg School) in Victoria.³⁵ Mather went on to be one of the trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria. In December 1894 Barak sat for a portrait that Mather painted, commissioned by another acquaintance of the de Pury family, Anna Leuba (the mother of Coranderrk's last matron, Natalie Roberts), and now held by Museums Victoria.³⁶

The relationship between Barak and Mather has provided information about the provenance of two of Barak's paintings in the Library's collection. From archival research undertaken for this article it has been discovered that *Aboriginal ceremony* and *Aboriginal ceremony with wallaby and emu* (both c. 1880 – c. 1890) were donated by Mather to the Industrial and Technological Museum in 1895 and later transferred to the Library, prior to 1930. At the

time, the Library, known as the Public Library, was housed with the Industrial and Technological Museum on Swanston Street, in Melbourne's central business district, along with the National Gallery of Victoria. Mather donated two paintings to the museum in 1895, listed in that year's trustees' report as '2 cardboards of drawings made at Coranderrk by W. Barak, 70 years old, last member of the Yarra Yarra tribe'.³⁷ Around 35 years later, the Public Library catalogued 'Collection of 2 framed sets of aboriginal [*sic*] drawings by William Barak', which were accessioned (entered into the Historical Collections Accessions book) in around 1930, when this register began.³⁸ Mather was listed as the donor for both of these donations, making it highly likely that a single donation took place in 1895. The paintings may have then been transferred to the Library – not unusual, given the changing parameters of the institutions and understandings of their holdings. What remains unclear is the provenance of the Library's third artwork by Barak, *Dancing scene* (c. 1880s), and a painting held by Museums Victoria, which was previously thought to have been donated by Mather. Its provenance requires further investigation in light of this research.³⁹

For the first time since their accession, in around 1930, we know through whom two of Barak's three artworks came to the Library. For many years there has been a kind of silence in the Library's catalogue, a gap where this information could or should have been. As colonial archives reflect the concerns of their creators and are organised according to their own particular logic, filling in such gaps and silences involves questioning archival conventions and pausing at their rules of placement and reference. Historian and anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler called this 'following the grain of the archive'.⁴⁰ Institutional boundaries were more flexible during the 19th century, and the Library, gallery and museum collaborated on exhibitions. With the added complexity of Barak's works often defying contemporary categorisations of art and ethnography, it is unsurprising that these paintings were not properly catalogued. Where limited provenance information is available for his artworks, as in the case here, it is through traces of Barak's relationships with different individuals that we gather evidence of his actions in preserving them.

Aboriginal ceremony and *Aboriginal ceremony with wallaby and emu* are highly suggestive of a friendship between Barak and Mather. Mather saw the importance of these items and donated them to a public institution, further ensuring their survival. It is unclear whether Mather was given the paintings by Barak or bought them, but it can be speculated that the men's relationship centred on art, with at least one meeting taking place in 1894, at the painting of Barak's portrait. Among Mather's favourite regions to paint were Healesville

and the hills and valleys surrounding Coranderrk.⁴¹ I imagine Barak and Mather discussing their different techniques and approaches and perhaps bonding over their love of Wurundjeri Country. Barak perhaps demonstrated his pencil underdrawing and use of ochre mixed with oil, and Mather could have showed Barak his watercolours. Perhaps they talked about painting outdoors, as we see Barak doing in a photograph of him also in the Library's collection (page 7). Whether such a conversation took place or not we will never know, but imagining the shape of their friendship serves to address the gaps and silences within the archives.

One last significant friend of Barak's was Anne Fraser Bon (1838–1936). A Scottish widow who ran a cattle farm in Wappan, north of Healesville, Bon was a supporter of Aboriginal people; her influence and forceful personality were felt during the Coranderrk Inquiry, and her charity to those in need continued throughout her life. In 1885 Bon commissioned a portrait of Barak, which she donated to the Library in 1901, two years before Barak's death, clearly recognising his renown at the time of Australia's federation (page 19). The artist, unusually, was a young woman, Florence Fuller, who had won the Victorian Artists' Society prize for the best portrait by an artist under 25.⁴² Her portrait of Barak, among five known to exist, depicts the Elder with greying hair and white beard in the period shortly after the Coranderrk rebellion.⁴³ As a trusted friend of Barak for many years, she received two (and perhaps more) paintings from him. These artworks, very similar in composition to the paintings in the Library's care, depict ceremonial gatherings with two hearths and animals among the action. In 1930 Bon donated one painting to the Historical Society of Victoria (now the Royal Historical Society of Victoria) and four years later one to the Ballarat Art Gallery.⁴⁴ It was during these years that she reflected on Barak's life, writing a short biography for Melbourne's *Argus* newspaper and donating the marble for his headstone. She wrote, 'When Barak could get a sheet of drawing paper he made the outside of his chimney his easel, having the canopy of heaven for his studio'.⁴⁵ Bon was among the first to celebrate Barak's life and art in writing, however her legacy is complicated by her support of the *Aborigines Protection Act of 1886*, which removed Coranderrk residents of mixed heritage and separated them from their families.⁴⁶

Barak's friendships not only provide avenues for the recovery of provenance information but also illuminate parallels within the artworks themselves. In *Aboriginal ceremony*, *Aboriginal ceremony with wallaby and emu* and *Dancing scene*, Barak presents cohesive gatherings of people distinguished by the distinctive intricate designs on their cloaks and their painted skin. An electric sense of sound and movement fills Barak's paintings and drawings, as though it is not



Florence Ada Fuller, *Barak: Last Chief of the Yarra Yarra Tribe of Aborigines*, oil on academy board, 1885, Pictures Collection, H24649

just with our eyes that he wanted us to appreciate the events he painted. Judith Ryan, curator at the National Gallery of Victoria, wrote how ‘Barak’s dancing figures leave us spellbound because he takes us right inside the event from his own inclusive Wurundjeri perspective’.⁴⁷ To me, the way the figures share the space in Barak’s ceremonial gatherings is highly suggestive of friendship.

Exhibition

Barak passed away on 15 August 1903. Over the course of the 20th century his paintings and drawings came to be recognised as examples of an Aboriginal art which continued the visual traditions of the continent’s south-east.⁴⁸ More recently they have been championed as important cultural documents by his descendants.⁴⁹ Art in the maintenance of cultural continuity has

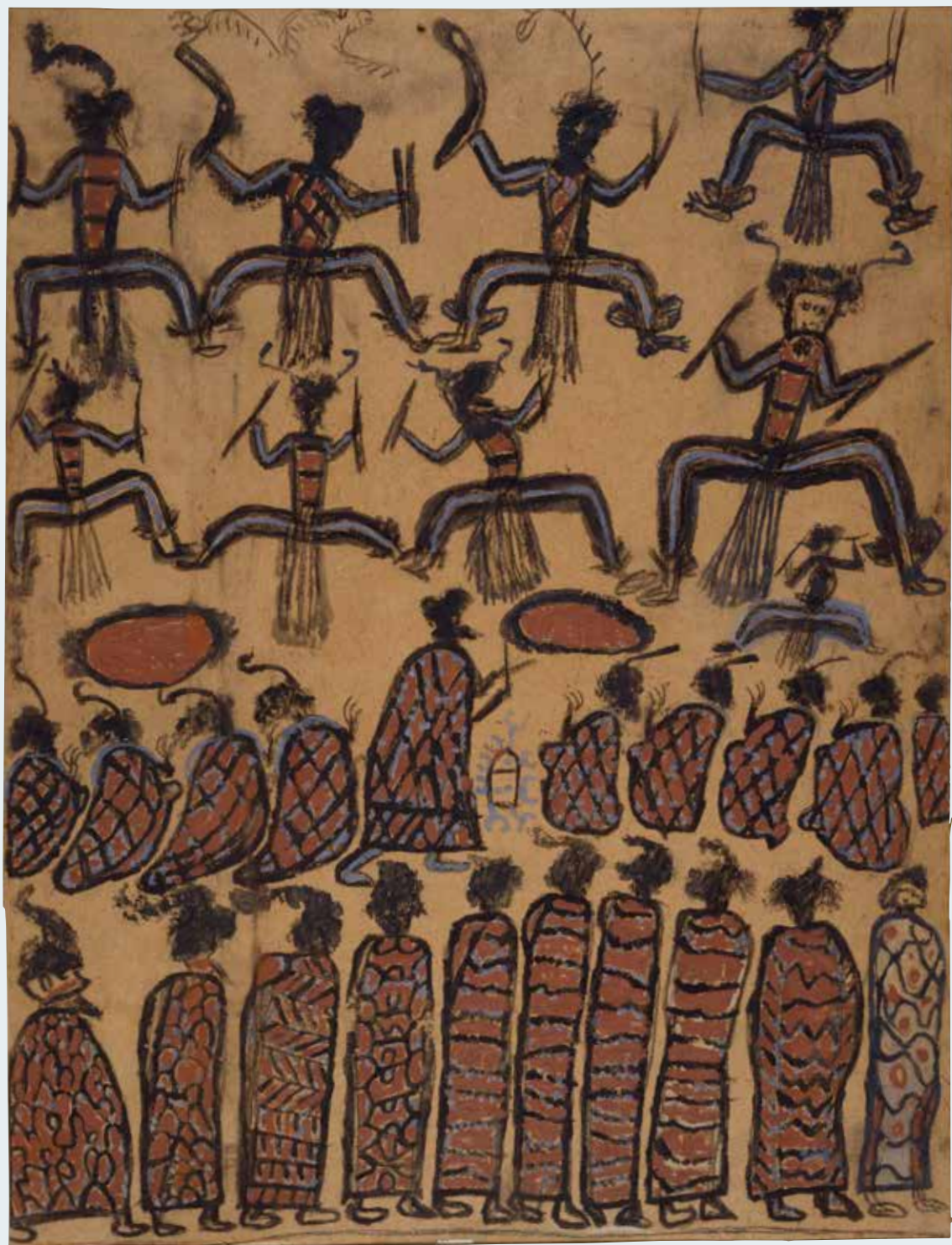
become Barak's significant legacy. An exhibition called *Remembering Barak*, in 2003, brought together a large collection of his paintings and drawings at the National Gallery of Victoria, confirming his status as an Aboriginal artist of significance. In histories of Aboriginal art and Australian art, Barak is mentioned alongside Albert Namatjira (Arrernte people, 1902–59) and Dick Roughsey (Lardil people, c.1920–85), and his contemporary Tommy McRae (Kwatkwat people, c.1835–1901).⁵⁰

Another significant exhibition on this road to recognition, *Primitive Art Exhibition*, was held in the Library complex in 1943. It was a joint exhibition organised by the National Gallery and National Museum of Victoria and exhibited visual and material culture from Australia, Oceania and Africa. This was the first time Barak's paintings *Aboriginal ceremony* and *Aboriginal ceremony with wallaby and emu* were publicly displayed. The show was curated and organised by German scholar Leonard Adam, who encouraged audiences to see the sculptures and two-dimensional works as art instead of as ethnography or curiosities. In the exhibition Barak's paintings were featured alongside ink drawings and sketchbooks by Tommy McRae (known at the time as Tommy Barnes), himself a significant Aboriginal artist of the 19th century. Also exhibited was a bark etching from Lake Tyrrell, north-west Victoria, bark paintings from northern Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory, collected by anthropologist Baldwin Spencer, and examples of wood and stone carving from around Australia. Utilitarian and ceremonial objects from Africa and Oceania were presented too, in what was billed as the first 'universal primitive art exhibition' in the world. In this context Barak's paintings were categorised as examples of Aboriginal art, viewed by the organisers as primitive – though it was recognised that he used a mixture of Wurundjeri and European materials. This did not lessen the aesthetic enjoyment for Leonard Adam, who was a pioneer in the recognition of Aboriginal material and visual culture as art.⁵¹ The exhibition marked a turning point in the appreciation of Aboriginal art and provided a space for the artworks to be discussed in aesthetic terms, rather than through an ethnographic discourse which classed them as objects of research illustrating evolutionary theories about Indigenous cultures.⁵² It was now possible to talk about Barak's paintings and drawings as artworks in their own right. The '*spontaneity* and absolute *sincerity* of the primitive artist', the organisers observed, were the characteristics uniting each item in the exhibition, providing a new language to describe what Aboriginal Australian peoples had been creating for tens of thousands of years.⁵³

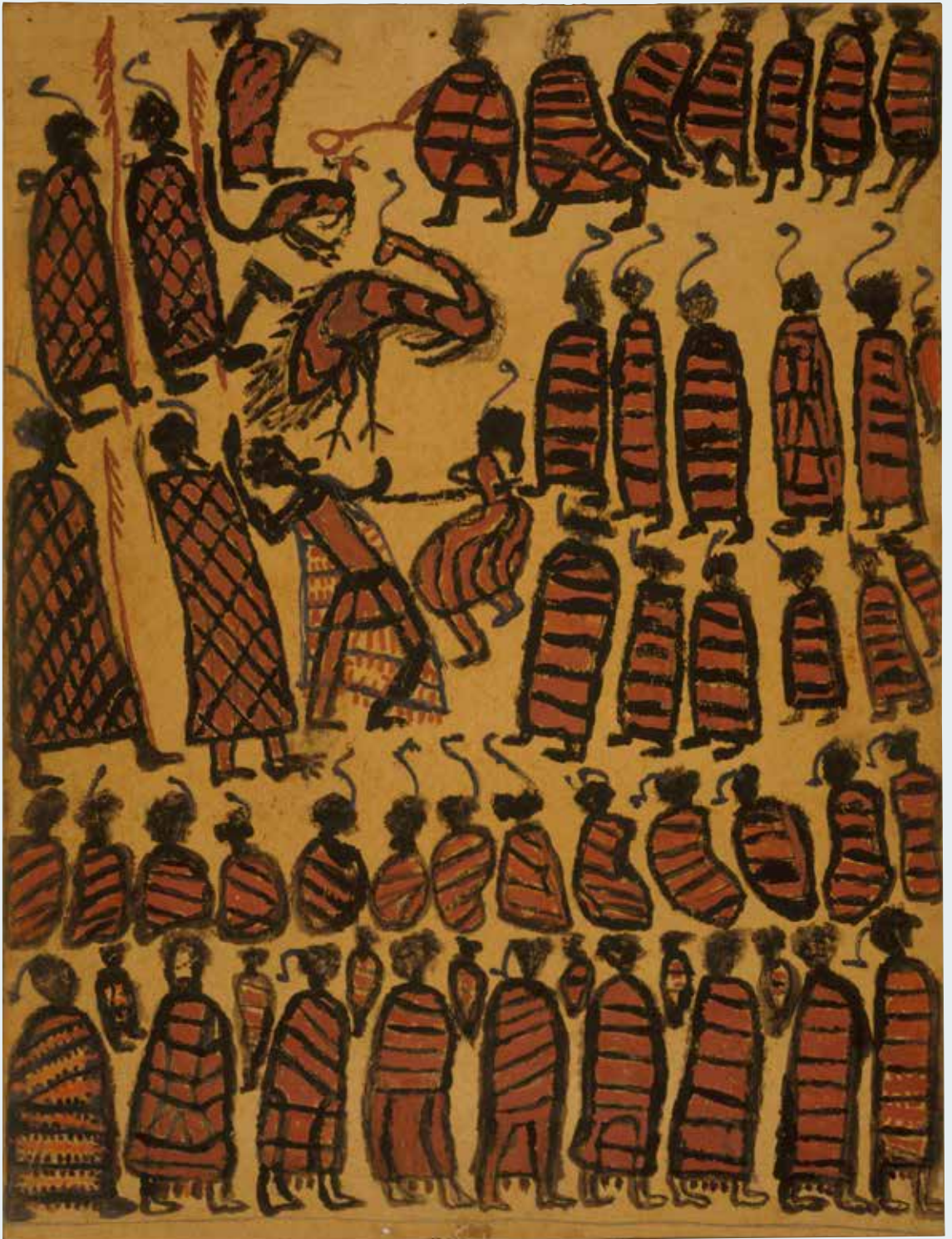
It was not until the late 20th century, however, that a well-rounded

understanding of Aboriginal art developed. As professor of anthropology Howard Morphy argued, 'The struggle for the recognition of Aboriginal art has been particularly about definition, about the right to be defined in terms of its own history rather than according to Western preconceptions'.⁵⁴ Barak's life and work reflect the trajectory towards greater acceptance and understanding of Aboriginal art, which grew out of circumstances common to his experience. Albert Namatjira also sold items of traditional use repurposed as souvenirs and artefacts for tourists before gaining wider recognition as a painter. For Namatjira and his Aboriginal contemporaries, the doors and walls of galleries were open, an experience not shared by Barak.⁵⁴ Missions provided the environment for experimentation in, the development of markets for and, throughout the country and in the 1970s internationally, the sale of Aboriginal art. Common to Aboriginal artists throughout this history was the desire to hold on to their heritage, and in some cases this meant a process of translating it for white audiences. Barak was a pioneer of this approach in his choice to sell and give specific artworks to friends and visitors as part of his diplomatic role and as artist and *Ngurungaeta*.

This brief overview of Barak's life and work has sought to contextualise his three artworks in the Library's collection. By exploring some of the key friendships in Barak's life it is possible to gain a greater understanding of the provenance of the paintings as well as of his actions in ensuring their preservation. This article has also revealed research that for the first time (since 1930) confirms the provenance of two of the three artworks under discussion. Barak met Scottish artist John Mather in the 1890s and in 1894 sat for a portrait. Mather's donations to the Library around this time demonstrate one avenue through which Barak was able to maintain some cultural continuity. During Barak's lifetime, his artworks were acquired most frequently by people visiting Coranderrk, where they observed aspects of Wurundjeri culture first hand. Tourism to Victoria's missions and reserves in the last decades of the 19th century presented some opportunities for Aboriginal people to continue practices threatened by the disruptions of colonisation. Boomerang carving and throwing and basket weaving are examples of practices which continued alongside Barak's painting. It is fitting that these details have been recovered, adding to and informing our understanding of the circulation, consumption and reception of Barak's artworks.



William Barak, *Aboriginal ceremony*, blue pigment, ochre and charcoal on cardboard, c. 1880 – c. 1890, Pictures Collection, H29640



William Barak, *Aboriginal ceremony with wallaby and emu*, brown ochre and charcoal on board, c. 1880 – c. 1890, Pictures Collection, H29641