

Rodney James

The Battle for the Spencer Barks: from Australia to the USA, 1963–68

Australian Aboriginal bark painting in its primitive form . . . represents our only great national art treasure.

Alan McCulloch, 1967¹

The opening of the new [Victorian] arts centre provides an opportunity for a special magnificent premiere [of indigenous Australian art] . . . All that is needed is a little imagination and proper co-operation between Museum and Arts Centre authorities . . . At the same time a long overdue tribute will have been paid to the life's work of a truly great Australian. [Baldwin Spencer]

Alan McCulloch, 1968²

IN HIS FAMOUS 1968 Boyer Lectures highlighting the paucity of coverage given to Aboriginals in mainstream Australian historical writing, W. E. H. Stanner singled out Alan McCulloch as the only one of ten contributors in W. V. Aughterson's *Taking Stock: aspects of mid-century life in Australia* (1953) to have 'anything to say about the Aborigines'. McCulloch, wrote Stanner, had bucked the deplorable silence in by making 'passing but perceptive observations of their art'.³

At first glance, Alan McCulloch (1907–1992) may be considered an unlikely commentator on Aboriginal art. A noted Melbourne critic, author, cartoonist, illustrator and 'School of Paris' devotee, McCulloch was appointed to the position of *Herald* art critic by newspaper proprietor Keith Murdoch in February 1951. This was a position McCulloch was to occupy for some thirty years, and along with his role as writer and associate editor of art with the literary magazine *Meanjin* (1951–1963), he fore-grounded the work of refugee artists (many of whom had arrived as Dunera Boys⁴ and during the post-war period) and wrote passionately and intelligently about emerging Australian moderns Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, Arthur Boyd, Charles Blackman, John Brack, Godfrey Miller and numerous others.

McCulloch's writings, however, for the *Herald* and *Meanjin* from 1951 show that he was among the first of the modernist critics to consistently address the position of Aboriginal art in the panoply of Australian art. He argued for and applauded stand-alone as well as mixed exhibitions featuring Aboriginal artists⁵ and made the case for professional curators to be appointed to properly care and administer Aboriginal collections. He also, with the University of Melbourne lecturer and curator Leonhard Adam, author of *Primitive Art* (1940), pressed for the establishment of a 'Museum of Primitive Art' to showcase collections of Aboriginal art drawn from across Australia.⁶

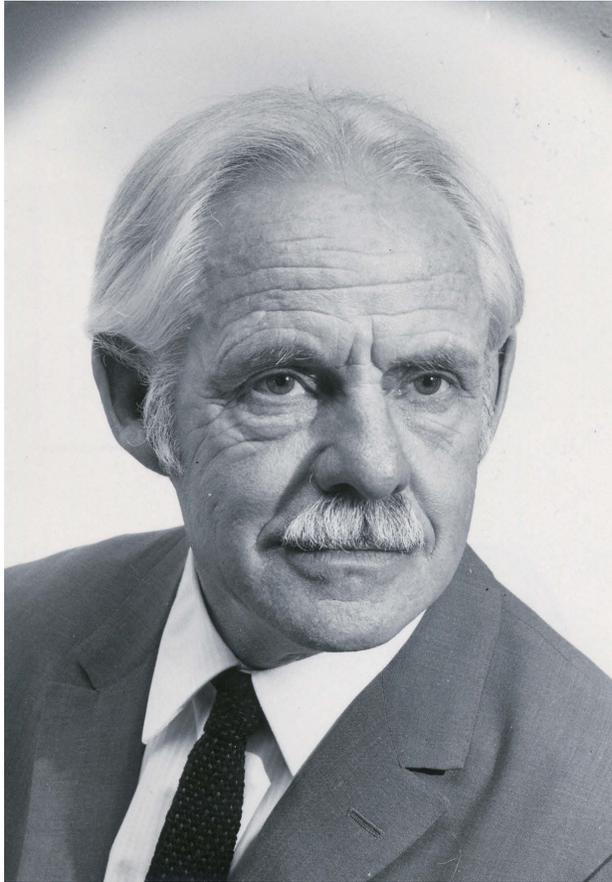
McCulloch championed Aboriginal art as a unique and vital tradition, albeit one that he believed should be cushioned from the worst excesses of Western culture and the destabilising influence of European art and its own culturally specific visual traditions.⁷

Alan McCulloch's most sustained and vociferous support, however, was directed toward the well-being and promotion of a vast collection of Aboriginal art and artefacts assembled by pioneering National Museum of Victoria (NMV) director (now Museum Victoria), anthropologist, artist and art collector, Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929).⁸ The Spencer Collection featured in major exhibitions held at the Museum in 1929 and 1943⁹ and parts of the 170 strong bark collection had been on display in the Museum's ethnographic galleries since the 1920s. McCulloch believed, however, that the Spencer Collection had been both underutilised and ill-cared for: his concern for the treatment of collection led to him visiting the Museum's storage vaults in the early 1950s and subsequently proposing that they be brought out on display. As Leonhard Adam¹⁰ noted in correspondence to McCulloch in 1955, the 'Sir Baldwin Spencer barks' are 'packed away all the time in the dark vaults of the building' and '... you are the man who has got the power to get things done'.¹¹

How Alan McCulloch eventually came to curate an exhibition from the NMV's collection of Spencer bark paintings and organise a tour to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 1965 is a remarkable story. Between 1963 and 1965, McCulloch drew together and became the centre of a dynamic tryst which spanned three continents and as many museums. This included the legendary James Johnson Sweeney, who had been appointed Director of Houston in 1961. Sweeney curated the largest exhibition of African art held in America for the Museum of Modern Art New York in 1935, and was known throughout the Western world for having excavated and transported a 16 ton Olmec Head to Houston for an exhibition he had arranged of Mexican art. Along with his exhibitions, Sweeney embarked on an acquisition policy for Houston which embraced both New Guinea and Australia, purchasing the Museum's first group of bark paintings from the Musée d' ethnographie in Basel, Switzerland in 1962 and following this with the purchase of a bark from the Australian Aboriginal Trust via the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the Spring of 1964.¹²

Important also was the highly respected Karel Kupka, the Czech-born artist who had made his name as a curator, writer and collector specialising in indigenous cultures. Prior to the Houston exhibition in 1965, Kupka had already visited Australia on four occasions, primarily to research and collect Aboriginal art and artefacts from Arnhem Land on behalf of the Basel Musée d' ethnographie and later, Musée des Arts Africains et d'Océaniens (*Musée du Quai Branly*) where he held the position of *Charge de Mission*. Having met McCulloch in Paris and worked with him on the Houston show in 1965, Kupka attempted to persuade Museum officials for the landmark exhibition to come to Paris following Houston.

The extensive correspondence between McCulloch, Sweeney and Kupka over the 1963-65 period reveals a mutual interest in the art and Aboriginal communities of



Alan McCulloch. Press photo taken c. 1968. Image courtesy of Susan McCulloch.

Arnhem Land, but also the lengths that each of these men went to secure the exhibition of Spencer bark paintings for their respective museums.

The development of the 1965 exhibition also had much wider implications, raising issues and concerns about how indigenous collections in Australia were formed, cared for, interpreted and displayed. Though not privy to internal efforts by the Museum to gain greater international exposure for its Aboriginal art collections from the 1940s,¹³ McCulloch's *Aboriginal Bark Paintings from Australia* was effectively the first exhibition of Aboriginal art from the National Museum of Victoria to tour internationally.

Following on from the example of the UNESCO sponsored exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Culture 1948-55* which toured to 14 venues in North America, then Canada and Australia between 1953-55,¹⁴ *Aboriginal Bark Paintings from Australia* was also at the vanguard of a cluster of 1960s Aboriginal art exhibitions developed by Australian state

galleries and museums that promoted Aboriginal art and culture on a world stage.¹⁵ Each of these exhibitions highlighted a longstanding debate in Australia between the aesthetic value of Aboriginal art and its ethnographic significance. In putting Indigenous art within a fine art context, there were to be important ramifications for both Australian museology and the reception of Aboriginal art abroad.

1964–65

James Johnson Sweeney's introduction to the NMV Aboriginal bark collection was in 1964. In his capacity as director of the prestigious Houston Fine Arts Museum in Texas and President of the International Association of Art Critics, Sweeney had been invited to Australia to mark the occasion of the newly formed Australian Division of the IAAC (1962) and to officiate at the second Georges Invitation Art Prize.¹⁶ In his role as inaugural IACC President in Australia, Alan McCulloch, was entrusted with looking after Sweeney while he was in Melbourne and took him on a whirlwind tour of Melbourne artists' studios, galleries and museums.

The Museum's bark collection was at that time held in vaults underneath the combined museum, gallery and library complex on the corner of Swanston and La Trobe Streets. In company with John McNally, recently appointed NMV Director, McCulloch, his daughter Susan and Sweeney were both excited and appalled by what they saw. Rows of bark paintings were stacked on one another, stored in cellophane bags and on 'improvised racks'. When McNally started to dust off one of the barks, McCulloch and Sweeney joined in unison, imploring him to stop 'as they watched a work being wiped clean of its pigment'.¹⁷

Before leaving Melbourne, Sweeney raised the possibility of a special loan exhibition of the barks being made available for Houston and on his return to the United States, was quick to remind McCulloch of their discussions and resolutions: 'I wonder what further you have heard about the "missing" bark drawings. I have not forgotten your promise to do "everything possible" to help me have a group for exhibit here in Houston of the Baldwin Spencer barks we saw framed and glazed in the Museum'.¹⁸

Over the next 18 months, McCulloch and Sweeney remained in steady contact. Their correspondence, held in the State Library of Victoria and the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, reveals the friendship and trust which developed between them and the obstacles that they had to surmount. By 31 July 1964, McCulloch reported that he had initiated contact, including speaking to 'members of the government and also the director of the Nat'l Museum of Vic. All seem sympathetic to the idea so far. McNally, the director asked me to get an official letter from you setting out details (especially the costs as the Museum has no funds). He said that before anything could be done they would need the services of a trained anthropologist etc., for purposes of documentation, catalogue etc., but as I am sure that this would be the last thing you would want (and seems to me arrant nonsense) I tactfully suggested that I would manage to provide what was necessary'.¹⁹

Sweeney's hectic schedule precluded his immediate focus on the idea of an American showing of the Spencer Collection. From his second home in Ireland, on route from the Venice Biennale to a *Mirô* exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London, Sweeney fondly reminisced of his time spent with the McCullochs in Australia noting: 'I know how much I must have missed simply on the basis of what I enjoyed in those few crowded days.'²⁰ Sweeney's appreciation of McCulloch's efforts and 'trouble to which you have gone in regard to the Bark Paintings and the suggestions you have given me' was followed soon after by a loan request for his comment and revision.

At the McCulloch suggestion, Sweeney's formal letter to the NMV Chairman of the Board of Trustees dated 31 August 1964 requested an exhibition of bark paintings from the Spencer Collection for a major showing in the 'coming season' including the 'ones we saw glazed', and a dozen or so others 'to give a wider representation'.²¹ Such a wide-ranging open request would not have endeared itself to either the Museum or the Curator-in-Charge. Nonetheless Alan McCulloch quickly followed Sweeney's formal request with his own letter of support and was duly advised that the matter would be put to the 7 October meeting of the Board.

When the answer did come it was a resounding no. Though the Trustees signalled their appreciation of the 'mutual advantages which could result from such an exhibition' the proposal was regretfully declined, citing the age and fragility of the barks, their 'great ethnological value' and the risk of damage caused by overseas transport.²²

McCulloch was first to receive notification of the decision. Forwarding the letter onto Sweeney he expressed his outrage: 'I would much rather not have enclosed such a stupid letter; it is most embarrassing to be saddled with this kind of idiotic bureaucratic administration of so valuable a trust'. Frustration turned to defiance as McCulloch plotted a course of action aimed at overturning the decision. He went to the top:

But please don't think this is the end of it; it is only the beginning. Having done the correct thing I will now take the matter direct to the government suitably armed with the copy of your original request and all the facts concerning the shameful neglect of the Spencer collection since it fell into Nat'l Museum hands.²³

J. J. Sweeney's response was more taciturn, sharing Alan's disappointment in the decision and thanking Alan for being such a 'sympathetic ambassador'.²⁴ Certainly his international stature as a curator, author and inaugural director of MoMA, New York carried some weight with Museum officials. However, it was McCulloch who was in the better position to take up the cause, immediately writing to Victorian politicians including friends such as Labor leader of the Upper House, Jack Galbally, as well as Eric Westbrook, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, for their support.²⁵

McCulloch's blunt request for 'official intervention' on the part of the Liberal government to help reverse the decision was sent to Sir Arthur Rylah, Chief Secretary and Deputy Premier of Victoria. Rylah's portfolio included the museum and the letter to him was accompanied by a damning report on the background to the collection, its perceived (mis)administration over the years, the lack of public display, absence of

proper curatorial records and the continuing risk of insect damage, mishandling and improper storage. In response to the Museum's stated concerns, McCulloch pointed to Sweeney's professionalism (considered 'the most important American art authority to have visited Australia') and his growing stature as a world authority on primitive art.²⁶

McCulloch conveyed the feelings of Spencer's daughter Alice Rowan and her bitterness over 'the treatment of the collection [and delight] at the loan exhibition idea, especially since some new editions of her father's famous books are soon to be published in Europe'.²⁷ McCulloch also had the precedent to draw upon one of the bark paintings from the Spencer Collection which had been loaned and returned without incident from an exhibition of Aboriginal art toured nationally under the auspices of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1960–61.

While McCulloch signalled his intent to NGV Director Eric Westbrook 'to fight this decision to the last ditch',²⁸ for his part, Sweeney confided to McCulloch: 'I would be the last person to want any damage to come to those pieces through a loan to us', adding 'But if I am not mistaken several of them were once loaned to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and I did not hear that they suffered on that trip'.²⁹ Sweeney subsequently wrote to McCulloch on 29 October 1964 thanking him for 'taking up the fight' and proposing to draft a letter in reply to offer the Trustees a 'face-saver'.³⁰

A softening approach was to follow. Early in January 1965, Deputy Premier Rylah wrote to McCulloch informing him that regretfully, while the Trustees had reiterated their earlier decision that the Spencer barks should not be sent overseas, and that while there were staffing difficulties they had conceded to maintain a representative selection 'on display in Spencer Hall' and to 'increase and improve display when circumstances permit'.³¹ Rylah left the door slightly ajar, conveying to McCulloch his request to the Trustees that they 'further examine their position with a view to making available certain less valuable bark paintings'.

The latter course of action was reiterated in a letter from James MacDonald, the Victorian State Government Parliamentary Secretary, as he announced a better financial deal for the Museum and advised that following his meeting with Professor Hills, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, that the Trustees would consider the idea mooted by Rylah when they came together in February 1965: 'If you have achieved nothing else, Alan, I am sure you have stirred a number of people into focussing light upon the many difficulties under which our Trustees are working and the importance of raising the whole institution to a higher level'.³²

With the spotlight now firmly upon them, the NMV finally gave ground. In April 1965, McCulloch reported to Sweeney that 'an unconditional surrender on the part of Museum trustees was in sight when unfortunately they discovered Sir Baldwin Spencer's original legal agreement concerning the collection . . . there in black and white was a clause which stated that no item collected and presented by Spencer should ever, at any time, leave the possession of the National Museum'.³³ Fortunately, as McCulloch went on to note, a way around the impasse presented with works not collected by Spencer himself

being made available for loan. Ironically, this included, as McCulloch noted, many of the barks he had previously selected since they had been collected not by Spencer but on his behalf. It was a fine but important point of difference.

McCulloch was able to once again ponder the exhibition and what form it might take. Following a series of visits to the Museum, he confirmed the institutions about-face in his letter to Sweeney: 'At last, after a whole year of intermittent warfare, the issue regarding the bark paintings has been resolved, at least partly to our satisfaction', indicating that his selection of 'about 21 barks and one 9 foot crocodile from communities in Arnhem Land' had received tacit approval from NMV Director John McNally. McCulloch put the final decision back onto Sweeney, conceding that that he might not want even to go ahead given how things had gone.

By this stage there was an added sense of urgency as McCulloch pondered the likely implications of key works from NMV being made available for other exhibitions being developed for international venues. Wrongly as it turned out, McCulloch believed that Tony Tuckson, organiser of the successful 1960-61 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art* which toured Australia and then a selection of which went onto the Biennale at San Paulo, Brazil, was working on another: 'I'm a little nervous about the rival exhibition being put together by Tuckson, Sydney, for the Commonwealth Arts Festival, London; scheduled time for this is October this year . . . I'd hate to think that having at long last opened up the doors of the National Museum of Victoria, someone else marched in and collected the spoils'.³⁴

A telegram sent from Sweeney three days later confirmed his interest and allayed McCulloch's fears: 'Delighted to hear of your success with bark drawings anxious to have exhibition please nail it down for us. Do not let it get away'. Moreover, rather than seeing any parallel exhibition being organised in Australia as a potential rival or competitor for loans, in his characteristically ambitious fashion, Sweeney gave McCulloch permission to broaden his selection of works from the NMV to include works from other collections, and specifically two Melville Island Barks which he had been shown to McCulloch by the then Director of the South Australian Museum, Norman Tindale, in 1964.³⁵

The final 24 works chosen by McCulloch represented a small, though cohesive selection of works from three collections drawn from different regions of Arnhem Land: Gunbalunyah (Oenpelli) on the Western border closest to Darwin; Yirrkala on Eastern Arnhem Land and the northern most tip at Cape Don on the Cobourg Peninsula. By concentrating his efforts on the first of these two places, McCulloch sought to introduce an international audience, presumably with little knowledge of indigenous Australian art, to some of its regional stylistic differences including the naturalistic, x-ray style art of Oenpelli and the use of cross-hatching to delineate form and space that we most closely identify with the art of Yirrkala.

The dominant group came from Oenpelli and consisted of 14 works including stencilled hands and feet, representations of spirit figures and single animals – including the 'largest known spontaneously made bark painting in existence' measuring

33 x 106 3/8 inches – which were attributed in the catalogue as belonging to the Cahill Collection. Precluded from this were any of the 38 paintings collected in 1912 from the Alligator, East Alligator and South Alligator Rivers³⁶ where Baldwin Spencer famously spent two months with the buffalo hunter and pastoralist, Paddy Cahill, and his wife and her sister who had taken up residency there in the early 1900s. The works acquired at this time were clearly what the NMV meant when it referred to the Spencer Collection proper, while works collected by Cahill in subsequent years between 1914-22 were considered as falling outside these parameters.

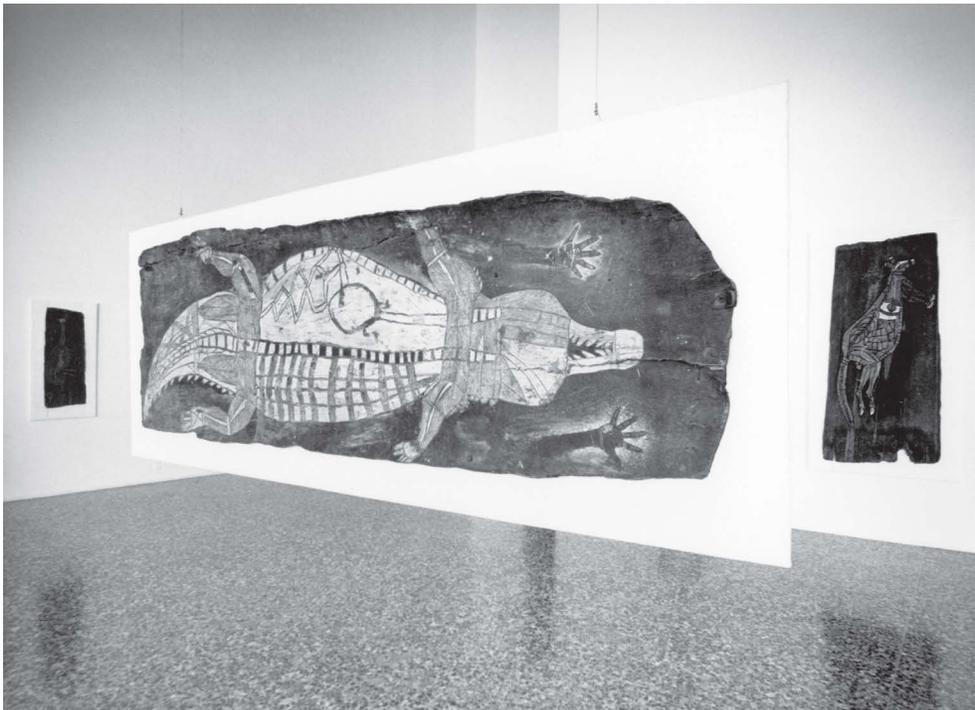
A second group consisting of seven composite paintings of marine life and animals were collected by Wilbur S. Chaseling who, following his ordination as a Methodist minister in 1935, set out to establish a new mission between the existing Methodist stations at Milingimbi and Groote Eylandt. He settled on a creek roughly halfway in between, after which Yirrkala was named. A third group of three works from the Cobourg Peninsula had been collected by the William Austin Horn in 1922 and were sparingly described in the catalogue list of works as male and female figures, ‘probably Iwatya tribe’.

Notwithstanding McCulloch’s efforts to expand the exhibition by including several Tiwi barks, his focus shifted in August 1965 from exhibition content to more practical considerations such as how the works could be best prepared for travel and display. The framing of barks from the Spencer/Cahill Collection for Australian tour in 1960/61 provided a sympathetic model for how they might be displayed and protected at the same time. As with the Houston exhibition, individual glass cases emphasised the unique quality of each work and represented a dramatic change from the classification systems and methodology of collecting and displaying of Aboriginal art which characterised Australian museums and galleries from the late nineteenth century.³⁷

All costs for the exhibition were borne by the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. New box frames costing just under four hundred pounds were built consisting of a heavy glass casing and plywood backing with mitred corners secured by long coach screws.³⁸ Using McCulloch’s contacts with the National Gallery of Victoria, notably a craftsman named Les Hawkins who had been recommended by NGV exhibition officer, the artist, Leonard French, the legacy of nail holes and splitting left by previous attempts to frame and/or exhibit the works was also attended to and a new way of mounting the works was utilised more in keeping with their age and condition.³⁹ The work was not without its own drama as an alternative studio workshop had to be found at short notice. McCulloch reported that ‘The barks were being framed as the building was being gutted around them; I’d never have exposed them to this risk in hands other than French-Hawkins [Leonard French and Les Hawkins] who watched the barks like babies.’⁴⁰

McCulloch was justifiably proud of their collective achievements. He wrote to NMV Director, John McNally, confirming that ‘all the frames and mounting’ had ‘been completed to his satisfaction’, there were 24 barks in 23 frames, with the 25th returned, and that ‘I feel sure you’ll agree that it’s a show to be proud of.’⁴¹ Having by this stage

The Battle for the Spencer Barks: from Australia to the USA, 1963–68



Two view of the exhibition (including a nine foot bark painting, bottom image), *Aboriginal Bark Paintings from the Cahill and Chaseling Collection*, National Museum of Victoria, Australia, 17 December 1965 – 30 January 1966, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. Photographs by Hickey and Robertson, RG05-148/02-001 and 02-002. RG05, Registrar's Office, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Archives. Images courtesy of Susan McCulloch.

secured the full support of McNally, including the provision of information relating to each work, which McCulloch duly checked off against Spencer's and Cahill's notes, he wryly noted in a letter to Sweeney that 'The Nat'l Museum trustees are now very proud of "their show" and one at least is visiting Houston to see it there'.⁴²

Having personally overseen the conservation and framing of the works, McCulloch expressed confidence in the exhibition as it now stood, 'a truly magnificent one' drawn from one museum collection. Counselling Sweeney against the need to look elsewhere for supplementary works, in particular, from the South Australian Museum, he wrote: 'My own feeling however is that our show is complete in itself and needs no addition.'⁴³ Documentation was subsequently prepared and sent on, including a draft of McCulloch's foreword and negatives of the 24 photographs. The frames were fitted and crated with the consignment readied to leave Melbourne on the 14 September on the Montreal Star scheduled to reach the Port of Houston on 30 October. The day after they set sail, McCulloch notified Sweeney that the barks were 'on the water'.

September 1965

Alan McCulloch travelled in the opposite direction, courtesy of the French Government who had invited him to visit France as a representative of Australian art and 'as their official guest to look over improvements wrought by Andre Malraux.' He wrote: 'I jump for joy to be restored, for two whole months to my first love – the beautiful world of drawing . . . I won't be really peaceful in my mind till the day they are on that ship'.⁴⁴ McCulloch's trip was also organised to coincide with the annual AICA conference in Paris at which he hoped to catch up with Sweeney and to look at the new Cité International artist studio-accommodation which had raised considerable interest in both Australia and America.

While Sweeney could not be located in Paris, McCulloch left Australia with a letter of introduction to Karel Kupka and was able to meet him. Kupka's seminal text on Aboriginal art had been translated from the French into English in 1965: quite naturally it figured among McCulloch's list of catalogue references. At their first meeting, Kupka perused the documentation that McCulloch had brought with him requesting copies of 'your excellent comments and the photographs of all the barks you might have', asking Alan to pass on his best wishes to Sweeney 'and to assure him that I would be glad to give him some additional information for his excellent collection of aboriginal arts'.⁴⁵

McCulloch ended up spending several sessions with Kupka, prompting the former to write urgently to Sweeney asking him to 'hold the catalogue' so that a revised version could be sent.⁴⁶ Following their final session, McCulloch 'finally arrived at [an] amended and corrected version', and openly acknowledged the contribution of the French curator: 'Kupka has been of very great help: I don't pretend to be an anthropologist and I am very grateful to him for having saved me from error.'⁴⁷ Moreover, Kupka 'immediately wanted to know if he could have the show for Paris'.⁴⁸

The language employed in the extended entries accompanying the list of works certainly points to the involvement of a third person.⁴⁹ Drawing upon his own artistic background and interests as well as his work as a curator of anthropology, Kupka's commentary ranged between a discussion on some of the artistic or formal qualities of works included in the exhibition, an outline of their possible symbolic meanings, and observations regarding the impact of European civilisation on Aboriginal art.

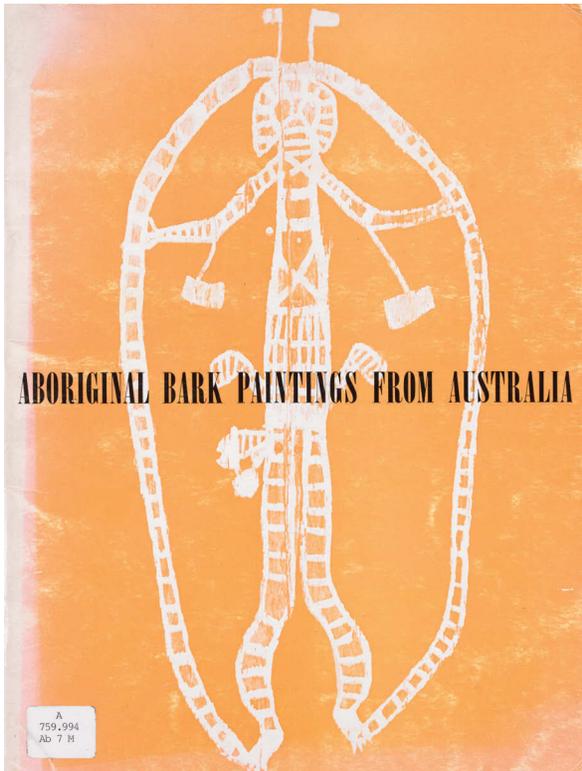
Karel Kupka shared in the mid-twentieth century belief in a primitive psychological experience, which could 'shed light on the universal origins of the aesthetic impulse in mankind'.⁵⁰ Aligning himself with the influential writings of French structural anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, Kupka argued, moreover, that Aboriginal culture was inherently susceptible to the destabilising influence of other cultures. In Arnhem Land he believed that he had found a relatively uncontaminated culture, and all care had to be taken to keep it thus. Kupka's views struck a responsive chord with both Sweeney and McCulloch. All three argued in their respective catalogue texts for the desirability of an indigenous art unsullied by the destructive forces of Western imposition. Not surprisingly, the same protective impulse posited by Kupka motivated Baldwin Spencer and Wilbur Chaseling in the development of their own collections of Arnhem Land art.⁵¹

Concerns over whether or not the barks had arrived safely in Houston led to sleepless nights, underscored by McCulloch's frustrations at not being able to make first-hand contact with Sweeney from Paris. Sticking to his original plans to go to Holland and then on to London and home, via New York, McCulloch finally received a reassuring cable from Sweeney on the day before his departure telling him that the barks had arrived safely and without incident.

Plans to put the opening back a week to 16 December and for McCulloch to be there for the opening were met with an enthusiastic response: 'If you could manage this for me all would be well. I would certainly love to attend the opening of the barks. Kupka is very anxious for the show to come to Paris and I'm having difficulty getting my set of photographs back from him: I'd be delighted of course but I have too many complicated commitments to do any more work on it. I'll try to give a talk to the Nat'I Museum trustees when I get back; I think their whole attitude is now sympathetic but one never knows'.⁵²

McCulloch arrived in Houston via New York on 10 December where he was 'royally received by Sweeney and saw his beautiful gallery'. Reeling in shock, McCulloch learned that Sweeney 'had sent out invitations for the opening of the show and a lecture the following evening by me', remarking: 'Only an Irishman like Sweeney or a Scot like McCulloch takes the law into their own hands like this and only an Irishman like Sweeney gets away with it'.⁵³

Following a few relaxing days spent with his old friend, broadcaster and political commentator William Winter, McCulloch returned to Houston to see the exhibition fully installed. Nothing could have prepared him (or his contemporaries) for what lay



Front cover of *Aboriginal Bark Paintings From Australia*. Exhibition Catalog, 1965, designed by Herbert Matter, © Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Archives.

before them. The 24 barks had been taken out of their glass cases and frames and expertly housed, suspended and set against the towering white walls of the Mies van der Rohe designed Cullinan Hall.

The change did not alarm McCulloch. Rather the striking minimalism of the hang was duly noted in an approving letter to his wife, Ellen: 'The barks look beautiful against the white walls of the Museum of Fine Arts'.⁵⁴ McCulloch was certainly aware of the space and its generous proportions and the system of suspending panels from the ceiling – he had been sent a series of photographs and a catalogue of an earlier exhibition in 1963⁵⁵ – the display, however, was 'signature Sweeney'.⁵⁶ At MoMA and later at the Guggenheim, Sweeney had forged a reputation on uncluttered exhibition design where architectural elements were stripped back to reveal only bare essentials and screens were suspended from the ceiling in a dramatic intersection of space. It was a method of display which McCulloch was to later adapt to great effect in exhibitions he organised back in Australia.

In the open, cavernous space measuring close to 100 feet wide, 95 feet deep and 30 feet high, the bold patterning, striking lines and resonant pigmentation of the barks meant that the works floated as though in space, casting shimmering effects off the walls and polished travertine floor in a way which was foreign to most Australian galleries

and museums of the time. The clean lines and generous exhibition space and hang were matched by the handsome catalogue design in which bold, black type was superimposed over a section of a lightning figure which in turn floated on an orange wrap-around cover. All 24 works were illustrated, one to a page with no borders or background colours or design elements with the catalogue printed in black and white. Corresponding text had been relegated to the back page. Clearly the catalogue reader was being encouraged to view each work for its artistic qualities alone and in this respect, the modestly scaled catalogue joined other notable examples in setting new standards for Australian Aboriginal art publications.⁵⁷

The response to the well-attended exhibition, both in Houston and further afield, indicated that the show was as popular commercially as it was a critical success. Houston's major daily newspapers each carried prominent exhibition notices and reviews.⁵⁸ Though the responses of writers were informed by popular tropes of the day – marvelling that such things could be produced by so primitive a people, Marguerite Johnston in particular wrote with sensitivity about the development of Aboriginal culture and art, 'which required imagination, invention, patience, painstaking effort'.

1966

Alan McCulloch expressed his deep appreciation of the exhibition and catalogue in a letter written to Sweeney following his return to Australia in January 1966: 'Just a note to thank you for all your wonderful hospitality to me during my stay at Houston . . . I thought the Museum was truly beautiful with its Mies van der Rohe facade . . . The bark paintings couldn't have looked better than they did so attractively mounted in that egg-white setting; I forget now whether or not I specially thanked Herbert Matter for his catalogue design – I can't think of any detail that might have improved the catalogue unless it was in the writing of the foreword'.⁵⁹

Notwithstanding the unnecessary downgrading of his catalogue contribution, the two combined again to explore ways to broaden visitation to the exhibition. Both Sweeney and McCulloch recognised the need to get full value from a collection which had travelled half way round the world and would be unlikely to tour again. While nothing came of Karel Kupka's request for the exhibition to go to Paris, Sweeney was contacted by several leading museums in the US during the period in which it was on display and he wrote to McCulloch now back in Melbourne: 'You ask what will happen to the exhibition after it closes here. We have extended it for a week because of the interest in it. Chicago's Museum of Natural History wrote some weeks ago about it. I would like to see it go there but I have been waiting to hear further before writing [to] Melbourne. Rene d'Harnoncourt [Director, Museum of Modern Art, New York] also expressed an interest in it through the catalogue and wrote me he planned to put the question to his board'.⁶⁰

Soon after, McCulloch raised the possibility of the exhibition going to Chicago and New York with the NMV Director, John McNally.⁶¹ However, the idea was rejected

by McNally and Museum trustees as was a counter proposal from McCulloch that the barks be displayed at the Argus Gallery in Melbourne for two weeks in June 1966, 'fresh from their USA triumphs'.⁶² Despite the fact that the 'the barks had weathered the trip to Houston and back in fine style' and that 'our old friend McNally was all enthusiasm . . . the Trustees declined and I gave it away in disgust'.⁶³

McCulloch's note was tempered by obvious disappointment though he and Sweeney recognised in subsequent letters the positive outcomes which the exhibition had brought about, both for the Spencer Collection and the National Museum of Victoria.⁶⁴ For his role in this, McCulloch received numerous notes of congratulation, including the personal thanks of Alice Rowan.⁶⁵ James MacDonald, the Victorian State Government Parliamentary Secretary, claimed the whole exhibition as 'a credit to Australia . . . [and] To you personally I extend my congratulations, as without your drive and enthusiasm this event would never have taken place, and I believe your efforts are a great contribution to the preservation of the bark paintings which will be held at our own National Museum'.⁶⁶

McCulloch was left to ruminate on what he perceived to be a lost opportunity to frame, document and exhibit the NMV's entire bark collection at no cost and resulting publicity 'that would have put them on the art map of the world'.⁶⁷ His advocacy of a specialist Museum of Primitive Art was once again flagged or short of that, stand alone collections developed and displayed in each of the State Galleries, proclaiming in his letter to Macdonald: 'What is needed in Australia is a proper museum of Primitive Arts. And why shouldn't it be in Melbourne, as part of the Nat'l Museum of Victoria?'

1967–68

The plans to rehouse the National Gallery of Victoria in new a purpose-built complex on St Kilda Road were seen by Liberal State Ministers and key officials as a partial solution to the Museum of Victoria's space problems. As work on the Roy Grounds design proceeded over 1967 and 1968, Alan McCulloch entered into a new debate. Using his position as *Herald* art critic, McCulloch argued that the opening of the new Victorian Arts Centre provided an ideal platform to launch 'a comprehensive display of indigenous primitive art of Australian aboriginals' – the neglected Spencer Collection – alongside the attraction of the architectural merits of the new building and 'a collection of the finest contemporary Australian art'.⁶⁸ Roundly criticised by Melbourne artists and critics for what they perceived to be McCulloch's reactionary position on contemporary Australian art – the opening exhibition *The Field* was a showcase for hard-edge and colour-field abstraction – McCulloch was instead lamenting a lost opportunity to celebrate Australian art and culture in a more expansive and inclusive mode. As he underlined in a letter to artist and critic Elwyn Lynn: 'It was not the exhibition that I deplored but the tragic waste of a great opportunity'.⁶⁹

McCulloch conveyed his hopes and concerns for the Spencer Collection in a series of letters and meetings between himself and J. V. Dillon, Under Secretary, Chief Secretary's Office, Treasury, John F. Rossiter, the Minister for Labour and Industry, and

R. J. Hamer, Minister for Local Government, in late 1967 during which time he also pressed for the creation of a statutory body ‘empowered to deal with matters affecting various arts developments within each state.’⁷⁰ McCulloch urged both Rossiter and Hamer to consider an international showing claiming, ‘the entire collection should be sent on an American-European tour.’⁷¹ He refuted the reply from Dillon that ‘many, if not all, of the problems which you mentioned are obviously due to lack of space at the Museum . . . which will be solved for the foreseeable future . . . once the Gallery relocates’, advocating instead, building a separate museum to honour Baldwin Spencer and his collection.⁷² ‘The opportunity exists for the establishment of a truly magnificent “Museum of Primitive Art”’, McCulloch wrote, ‘one that could complement the collections of the new Victorian Arts Centre and help make Melbourne the art centre of the entire South Pacific area.’⁷³

Twenty-five of the Spencer barks, the majority bearing their Houston frames, were brought out on display for a dinner organised at the NMV for the Australian visit of Prince Phillip in 1968.⁷⁴ Though by now adopting a more conciliatory attitude towards the Museum, the Director and Trustees, and giving recognition to the work that was at last being undertaken, the last word was reserved for McCulloch: namely, a call for a museum to honour Baldwin Spencer and his remarkable collection of Aboriginal art which had first brought to notice the art of Western Arnhem Land. In reply to a letter from the recently knighted Australian actor, Sir Robert Helpmann, McCulloch declared: ‘The entire collection should be publicly displayed either permanently or in a series of constantly changing exhibitions expertly mounted, and selections from it should be used for travelling exhibitions initiated from Australia in exchange for important exhibitions abroad.’⁷⁵

Though his pleas were not to be acted upon immediately, Alan McCulloch’s views were, in a sense, before their time. Public recognition of the country’s Indigenous heritage and advocacy for properly funded and administered State and Federal museums capable of delivering adequate storage, display and interpretation of Australia’s indigenous collections ones which would rival those which McCulloch had personally encountered overseas – along with the initiation of ‘blockbuster’ touring exhibitions of indigenous art were still to come. In addition to these, McCulloch’s proposal to cover the Jolimont rail yards in Melbourne and build a gallery of Aboriginal and Oceanic Arts (anticipating recent calls for the creation of such an annexe on that site by over four decades), reveal a man passionately and intelligently engaging with the art of his time. Though it went largely unrecognised at the time in his own country, his vision and commitment to take the Spencer Collection of bark paintings to a world audience in 1965, was a measure of the significance of Baldwin Spencer’s unique collection and his, and J. J. Sweeney’s passion for Aboriginal art.