



image © Joe Dhamanydji

## **Buku-Manapanmirr**

*Meeting Together and sharing Yolngu  
Knowledge and Culture*

## Innovation within tradition: the art of Milingimbi

The art of Milingimbi (Yurrwie Island) – just one kilometre off the Arnhem Land coast – may not occupy as high profile a place in the minds of today's art loving public as the larger and better known Arnhem Land arts centres of Maningrida, Ramingining, Oenpelli and Yirrkala. However the art of Milingimbi has played a pivotal and fundamentally significant role in the development of Australia's Indigenous art for more than 80 years.

Home to at least eight different language groups including Grupapungu, Djambarrpuyngu and Lilyagalawumirri, a 'sea closure' under the Northern Territory's Aboriginal Land Act prohibits non-Indigenous people from entering and remaining in this 'sea country' area without permission. This has allowed Milingimbi residents to maintain their traditional life while also strongly embracing Western educational and other systems.

The Island's main settlement has evolved from mission days, having been established by the Reverend James Watson of the Methodist Overseas Mission in 1916.

For many years, Milingimbi was the largest mission station in north-central Arnhem Land. Today, huge tamarind trees line the sea-front of the small settlement town which is home to some 1000. Mangrove forests and mud-flats, rich in food such as large mud crabs and shellfish, lead from the white sands into fresh, clear waters, with small islands (many of which are homeland settlements) stretching into the Arafura Sea.

Missionaries such as TT Webb, Edgar and Ann Wells and Harold and Ella Shepherdson, did not see the maintenance of traditional practice and culture as an obstacle to their evangelism and encouraged both traditional ways and the making of art.

During the 1940s, 50s and 60s, Milingimbi mission and its subsidiaries in Darwin and the southern cities were the main outlets for Central Arnhem Land art.

Milingimbi art includes figurative and abstract bark paintings, a wide range of carvings including yidaki (didgeridu), morning star poles, hollow log coffins and figurative sculptures as well weaving and shell and seed beads.

Many famous 20th century central Arnhem Land artists lived or spent time at Milingimbi. These include David Malangi, Dawidi Djulwarak (one of whose sons is well-known painter Philip Gudthaykudthay), Paddy Dhathangu, Micky Durrng, and many others whose paintings are in public collections but whose names weren't recorded.

Ethnographer Baldwin Spencer collected the first examples of this work in the early 1900s. Many later anthropologists and writers made it their base for field-trips. These included US sociologist William Lloyd Warner who, between 1927 and 1929 collected barks for the Australian Museum, Sydney, and researched his 1937 book, *A Black Civilisation*. Anthropologist Donald Thomson, made it his base on a number of occasions in the 1930s with other frequent visitors including Charles Mountford, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, writer Alan Marshall and teacher, critic and artist Wallace Thornton who bought many works from

Milingimbi mission, later acquired by Tony Tuckson for the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

From 1961 teacher Alan Fidock further encouraged the acquisition of art by significant collectors including Tuckson for AGNSW and Karel Kupka for the Oceanic arts collection in Paris (now housed in the Musée du Quai Branly). Later collections include the 1970s collection of Ed Ruhe and Louis Allen from the USA, now largely in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

In 1967 the practical mud-brick arts centre was built in the beachside location where it still stands; Fidock was its first manager. Djon Mundine was appointed art and craft adviser in 1979, working from Milingimbi and later Ramingining for the next ten years.

During the 1980s and 90s, Milingimbi as an independent arts centre was eclipsed by developments at the nearby mainland settlements of Maningrida and Ramingining. A number of Milingimbi artists were instrumental in establishing the Ramingining settlement and in developing its arts centre closer to their homelands. The profile of Milingimbi art dwindled until the early 2000s when Milingimbi artists again employed a permanent manager and revived their centre.

Over the last ten years Milingimbi artists have run their arts centre with commitment and vision. Today's art is notable for its innovation within tradition, variety, creativity and fine aesthetic quality. Huge fish traps and other weavings, striking sculptures and a great range of barks and works on canvas are once again positioning Milingimbi as a highly significant arts centre. In 2007 Margaret Rarru Garrawurra, sister of Micky Durrng and Ruth Nalmakarra, demonstrated the significance of this evolution when she won the bark award of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

Passionate about their culture, lands and art Milingimbi artists are also highly pro-active in programmes such as this comprehensive Woolloongabba Art Gallery project. Not only is this a first class chance to see more than 50 new high quality works of great variety but to also engage directly with 16 dedicated and highly articulate artists dedicated to promoting knowledge about their art, lands and culture. Such an experience is rare for a western audience and should not be missed.

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Ref: McCulloch's Aboriginal Art:  
the complete guide

[www.mccullochandmcculloch.com.au](http://www.mccullochandmcculloch.com.au)



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*A celebration of cultural sharing through traditional and contemporary interpretations of 'Raark' painting, carving and weaving, by the artists of Milingimbi arts centre in Arnhem Land.*



**8 July - 6 August 2011**

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