

# Seeing the natural world

## Birds, animals and plants of Australia

Donna Leslie

A cultural treasure from the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture was displayed recently in the exhibition *Seeing the natural world: Birds, animals and plants of Australia*, held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art from 20 March to 2 June 2013. The treasure—a beautiful and thought-provoking Australian Aboriginal parrying shield—powerfully communicates the changing world of Aboriginal Victoria in the late 19th century.

*Seeing the natural world* also presented bark paintings and works on paper drawn from the University of Melbourne Art Collection, as well

as four 19th-century natural-history books from Special Collections in the Baillieu Library. While the selected artworks and books were chosen because they are about the natural world, each is culturally distinctive in its own right. How an artist relates to nature depends upon the particular cultural lens through which she or he sees, understands and in turn relates to life on Earth. This idea inspired the development of the exhibition as a way of facilitating visitors' enjoyment in the artworks, as well as encouraging reflection, learning and investigation across cultures and time.

As its title suggests, the exhibition presented opportunities for the

viewer to consider afresh Aboriginal and European cultural ways of seeing nature. The carefully selected group of artworks invited consideration of how these particular artists have responded to nature. Looking more closely at depictions of birds, animals and plants of Australia in turn encourages awareness of, and appreciation for, Australia's remarkably diverse species, providing a perpetual source of inspiration to those willing to open their hearts, minds and spirits to the natural world. To really 'see' nature is a meaningful opportunity for spiritual growth and can be a pathway into understanding our place on this precious Earth.



**Previous page:** Unknown Victorian Aboriginal artist, Parrying shield (side A), late 19th century, wood and natural pigment, 69.0 × 10.5 × 3.0 cm. Accession no. 1960.0689, Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

**Below:** John Gould (artist), Elizabeth Gould (artist), Charles Joseph Hullmandel (lithographer), *Menura superba* (Superb lyrebird), c. 1842, lithograph, sheet 55.0 × 36.8 cm, originally published in vol. 3 of John Gould's *The birds of Australia* (7 vols), London: John Gould, 1840–48. Accession no. 1951.0001, gift of the Society of Collectors, 1951, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

*Seeing the natural world* included works by Mildjingi bark painter Mick Makani Wilingarr (c. 1905–1985) from central Arnhem Land, and Groote Eylandt bark painters Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika (c. 1900–1972), Quartpot Nangenkibiyanga Warramarrba (c. 1900–1972) and Peter Nangwurrama Wurrawilya (1926–1986), presented alongside a group of natural-history and botanical illustrations by John Lewin (1770–1819), John Gould (1804–1881), Elizabeth Gould (1804–1841), Henry C. Richter (1821–1902) and the Australian botanical artist Margaret Stones (born 1920).<sup>1</sup> Culturally significant barks from Groote Eylandt and the carved wooden parrying shield from Victoria communicated ancient traditions and an Aboriginal encounter with cross-cultural life. Drawn from the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture, which was formed between 1942 and 1960 by Dr Leonhard Adam (1891–1960), ethnologist and lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Melbourne, these works provided pathways for reflection on, and investigation into, Aboriginal ways of seeing and painting the natural world.<sup>2</sup> Six barks and the parrying shield were drawn from



John Gould (artist), Henry C. Richter (lithographer), Hullmandel and Walton (printer/lithographer), *Licmetis nasicus* (Long-billed cockatoo), c. 1846–47, lithograph, sheet 56.5 × 39.0 cm, originally published in vol. 5 of John Gould, *The birds of Australia* (7 vols), London: The author, 1840–48. Accession no. 1951.0002, gift of the Society of Collectors, 1951, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

the collection that Adam assembled to support the comparative study of world cultures and for teaching at the university.

The works of Mick Makani Wilingarr speak of Aboriginal connectedness with the natural world, and immersion in nature as inseparable from, and essential to, Aboriginal life and tradition. The work of the artists John Lewin (who arrived in Australia in 1800), John and Elizabeth Gould (who visited Australia in 1838–39) and Henry C. Richter (who worked with Gould in England from c. 1841 to 1881) are among the best 19th-century European natural-history illustrations in the world. The superb attention to detail in lithographs like *Menura superba* (c. 1842) by John and Elizabeth Gould (illustrated left) indicates the union of the scientific recording of nature with a particular aesthetic approach to illustration. This union had a profound effect on the classification of the natural world over the next 100 years.

*Menura superba* and *Licmetis nasicus* (c. 1846–47) were displayed in a group of eleven lithographs taken from John Gould's seven-volume set of books *The birds of Australia* (London, 1840–48). Lithographs published by Gould and copper-plate engravings produced by John Lewin reflect the



scientific analysis and documentation of nature at a time when European interest in science was expanding in exciting ways. Accompanying the display of framed bird lithographs was the three-volume set of books, *The mammals of Australia*, published by Gould in 1863.<sup>3</sup>

The display included the third (1822) edition of Lewin's *A natural history of the birds of New South Wales, collected, engraved, and faithfully painted after nature*, from Special Collections in the Baillieu Library. First published in Sydney in 1813, and now rare, the 1813 version was Australia's first illustrated book and the first natural-history book

published in Australia. It includes some of the earliest copper-plate engravings made in New South Wales. Lewin was the first free-settler professional artist in Australia and one of the first settler artists working in the Western art tradition to depict the natural world in Australia.

The work of the Australian botanical artist Margaret Stones, who began her career in the mid-1940s, also belongs to this tradition. Her repertoire of botanical drawings and watercolours is an outstanding, internationally recognised achievement. Stones' gifts as a botanical artist are evident in some of her earliest work, commissioned in the 1940s by Sir Russell Grimwade. (These became part of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest to the University of Melbourne in 1973.) In later works such as *Rhododendron lochiaie* (c. 1973), Stones demonstrates not only the quality and development of her art, but her remarkable experience, talent and skill (illustrated page 6).

Visitors to the exhibition were encouraged to consider Aboriginal ways of seeing the natural world through stories and cultural meanings, and to contemplate European cultural traditions in seeing and depicting nature through observation and documentation.

Margaret Stones, *Rhododendron lochiaie* (Native rhododendron), c. 1973, watercolour, sheet 44.0 × 35.3 cm. Accession no. 1974.0003, purchased with funds from the Charles Duplan Lloyd Trust, 1974, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

All of the works on display reflected the special characteristics of the individual, cultural and collective artistic vision. In turn, viewers were invited to consider their own relationship with nature.



### A cultural treasure

The decision to include the Aboriginal parrying shield in an exhibition consisting mostly of 19th-century lithographs, 20th-century bark paintings and watercolour and ink works on paper was easy, because the shield symbolises the immense change that took place in Australia during the colonial era when the

lithographs were being made, and the cross-cultural relationships that developed in the 20th century when the bark paintings and works on paper were being created.

Importantly, the shield is carved with imagery indicating the way its maker saw the natural world and the radically shifting environment around him. A line drawing of birds, animals and plants incised carefully into the wooden surface of the shield made viewers want to learn more, yet the shield has no recorded provenance. The only clue to its origin is crude script emblazoned on one side in white chalk (A): 'PARRYING SHIELD / EUROPEAN MOTIVES [i.e. motifs] / OLD VICTORIAN' (see front cover).

On the other side (B, pictured page 7), the number '17' is chalked, indicating its sale at auction at some stage in its history—perhaps Adam acquired the shield that way. If the chalk inscription is accurate, and it had been offered for sale in the 1940s or 1950s when Adam was building his collection, it would have been an unusual find because items of Aboriginal material culture from Victoria, such as shields, were difficult to obtain even by the 1930s.<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally, shields were widely used by Aboriginal people across Australia. While there is extremely

limited information about the example on display, its form indicates that it was made to be used for protection against blows from clubs, because it is characteristically narrow, deep and heavy in weight.<sup>5</sup> But its maker might have intended it as a keepsake, because it was made in the late 19th century when Aboriginal life had already changed irrevocably as a consequence of imposed colonial controls that restricted Aboriginal people and encouraged or demanded cultural assimilation. Perhaps the parrying shield was made as a poignant and cherished personal memento.

Variations in the types of shields that were made reflected different relationships with the land and between Aboriginal groups. Today, the lack of adequate documentation about many items of Aboriginal material culture held in museum collections is a powerful reminder of the dramatic changes that took place, including the forced relocation of Aboriginal people from their homelands during the colonial period. When shields were collected and exchanged they were sometimes attributed to a place in generic terms only. Early navigators, explorers and settlers made scant reference to the identification of shield types, but there were later recorders

Unknown Victorian Aboriginal artist, Parrying shield (side B), late 19th century, wood and natural pigment, 69.0 × 10.5 × 3.0 cm. Accession no. 1960.0689, Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture, University of Melbourne Art Collection. See also side A on front cover.



of Aboriginal material culture, including Robert Brough Smyth (1830–1889) who in 1878 published illustrations and descriptions of shields from Victoria. There is also some evidence from early linguists who attempted to record common words to denote Aboriginal shields, but these references were also scanty and inconsistently documented.<sup>6</sup>

The maker of the parrying shield on display recorded his world in what appears to be an illustrated story about Aboriginal life, tradition and European contact. Reading from left to right (on side A), there are four illustrations. The first depicts a European settler wearing Western clothing and carrying a walking stick; next to him is a snake in the foreground of a cottage. In the second illustration, what appears to be an anchor is carved inside a heart shape—perhaps it refers to a sailor’s tattoo. In the third, a symmetrical floral design reminiscent of plant-inspired decoration found in Western decorative arts has been carefully carved. The fourth and final illustration tells a story about hunting. A hunter is waiting in readiness with a gun; opposite him are a dog (or dingo), a kangaroo, an emu and her chicks, and a bird perched in a tree above. On the other side of the shield (side B),

a scalloped design is framed by rectangular shapes and flanked by the four symbols of a pack of playing cards: the heart, spade, diamond and club.

The parrying shield is one of 1,300 objects in the Leonhard Adam Collection and, like so many other treasured items in the University of Melbourne Art Collection, it has exciting and layered stories to tell, not only about its fascinating inscribed chronicles, but its yet-to-be-discovered provenance and the circumstances surrounding its creation. For example, the entire shield is cleanly finished in a way that suggests it was made with European tools. It might even have been made from wood salvaged from a piece of European furniture.

The shield and the other works in *Seeing the natural world* collectively conveyed how some artists see and relate to nature. Their ways of seeing may be interpreted as an outcome of cultural and experiential influences which so powerfully guide different understandings of, and relationships with, all life on Earth.

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- 1 To my knowledge, an exhibition comprising primarily bark paintings and natural-history and botanical illustrations has not been displayed before.
- 2 The Ian Potter Museum of Art acknowledges its role as one of custodianship of the Groote Eylandt bark paintings. Consultation is appropriate and respectful of the ongoing connection the people of the Groote archipelago have with their material culture. See Joanna Bosse, *Creation tracks and trade winds: Groote Eylandt bark paintings from the University of Melbourne Art Collection*, Melbourne: Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2006.
- 3 John Gould (and Henry Constantine Richter), *The mammals of Australia* (3 vols), London: The author, 1863. Gift of Miss Gladys Bell, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 4 In 1929, a sale catalogue produced by Tyrrell’s Museum in Sydney noted that Aboriginal material culture was ‘becoming difficult to obtain’. (Donna Leslie, *Aboriginal art: Creativity and assimilation*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 2008, p. 27.)
- 5 There were two types of parrying shields traditionally used by Australian Aboriginal people. The other type was wide, thin and lightweight and was used to ward off spears. (Aldo Massola, ‘The parrying shields of south-west Australia’, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 76, 1963, pp. 227–8.)
- 6 Michael Hoare, ‘Smyth, Robert Brough (1830–1889)’, *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 6, Melbourne University Press, 1976; Robert Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria: With notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania, compiled from various sources for the government of Victoria*, Melbourne: Government Printer, 1878; Massola, ‘The parrying shields of south-east Australia’, pp. 227–8.