

Helen Lempriere

Mid-20th century representations of Aboriginal themes

Gloria Gamboz

The best-known legacy of the Australian painter, sculptor and printmaker Helen Lempriere (1907–1991) is the sculpture prize and travelling scholarship awarded in her name. Less well known, however, are her post–World War II works exploring Aboriginal myths, legends and iconography. Twelve of these are held by the Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne, and have recently been made available on the museum’s online catalogue.¹ They form part of a wider collection of works both by, and depicting, Helen Lempriere, bequeathed by Lempriere’s husband, Keith Wood, in 1996.² The collection is likely to have come to the Grainger Museum through a mutual contact, the Sydney-based curator, collector and gallery director Elinor Wrobel, who curated a series of exhibitions at the Grainger Museum in the 1990s and staged two Lempriere retrospective exhibitions in the mid-1990s at her Woolloomooloo Gallery in Sydney.³

Lempriere’s works form part of an early 20th-century revival of interest in Aboriginal culture among settler Australians, and have been described as ‘an early attempt to express [Lempriere’s] belief in the basic duality of the European-Australian artist by combining Aboriginal themes with European colours and techniques’.⁴

While living in Paris and London in the 1950s, Lempriere was influenced by anthropological descriptions of Australian Indigenous cultures, and developed a highly personal and expressive mode of interpretation that blended Aboriginal themes with her own vision. The appropriation of Aboriginal themes by non-Indigenous Australian women artists like Lempriere in the first

half of the 20th century has created some contention, and these works are now being reinvestigated as part of a broader examination of emerging Australian nationhood. A study of Lempriere’s life, influences and key works provides an insight into the cultural climate of post–World War II Australia, and the understanding of Aboriginal culture by non-Indigenous women artists.



Opposite: Helen Lempriere, *Nimbawab lost*, 1956, emulsion on board, 92.0 × 95.0 cm. 1996.5003, donated by Helen Lempriere and Keith Wood estate 1996, Grainger Museum Collection, University of Melbourne. © Reproduced courtesy Perpetual Trustees.

Early influences

Helen Lempriere was born into a cultured, middle-class family in the affluent Melbourne suburb of Toorak. Her mother, Dora Elizabeth Mitchell, and father, Charles Algernon Lempriere, were prominent in business, social and sporting circles, and actively supported local artists such as Janet Cumbræ Stewart, Bess Norris Tait and Archibald (A.D.) Colquhoun, by commissioning family portraits.⁵ The family also had strong ties to the performing arts: Dora Mitchell's elder sister, Helen Porter Mitchell, was the noted Australian soprano Dame Nellie Melba; Dora and Melba's father (Helen's grandfather) was the leading Melbourne builder David Mitchell, a close colleague and friend of John H. Grainger, father of composer Percy Grainger.⁶

Helen Lempriere was interested in art from a young age, recalling 'I can never remember a time when I did not paint',⁷ and in her early twenties took formal lessons with A.D. Colquhoun at his studio in Little Collins Street in Melbourne.⁸ An influential teacher and tonal painter, Colquhoun taught pre-eminent students including (Sir) William Dargie, Harley C. Griffiths, Rex Bramleigh and Hayward Veal, with an 'unquenchable zest for attainment' and a 'high ideal'.⁹

Colquhoun had studied drawing under Frederick McCubbin, and was mentored by his friend and tonal-school proponent Max Meldrum. One of Meldrum's students, Justus Jorgensen, also taught Lempriere, and later became an influential figure in her artistic and personal development.

Montsalvat

Lempriere became a pupil of Jorgensen in 1930, at one time studying alongside her mother Dora at Jorgensen's Queen Street studio in Melbourne.¹⁰ By 1935 Jorgensen had become a 'dissident ex-Meldrumite'¹¹ and was building Montsalvat, an artist colony in Eltham, which offered painters and craftworkers an opportunity to hone their artistic skills among likeminded artists, and to experience a freer, more meaningful life, 'free of materialism, oppression and prurience'.¹² Eschewing her conventional upbringing, Lempriere followed Jorgensen to Montsalvat in the mid-1930s and later used the financial independence afforded by an inheritance to move there permanently.¹³ Described as one of the notorious 'bohemians' who inhabited the colony, she played an active role in its construction, making mud bricks for walls and carving many wood and stone decorations.

Lempriere's art at Montsalvat largely continued in the Meldrumite tonal tradition, the influence finally dissipating following her marriage to Keith Wood in 1945 and their relocation to Sydney.¹⁴

New horizons

The post-World War II cultural landscape in Australia was a complex and rapidly changing one, with the country still recovering from both the war and the Great Depression.¹⁵ Sanders and Berryman describe 'a small and under-developed commercial gallery system and staid national and (the few) regional galleries under the control of conservative trustee boards'.¹⁶ Struggling for recognition and wider acceptance, women artists were still largely viewed as proficient imitators, naturally obedient and disposed to conform, and lacking the intellectual faculties required to create artwork of significance.¹⁷ Several prominent men, including Max Meldrum and J.S. MacDonald (director of the National Gallery of Victoria), had made pronouncements about women's unsuitability for the life of an artist, the poor quality of their work, and their 'tremendous intrusion' into the male-dominated sphere of painting.¹⁸ Work produced by financially independent women

like Lempriere was further derided and dismissed. Ambrus writes:

After the end of World War II and during the 1950s women artists ceased to have any visible presence. The era of the 1950s represented the lowest point the status of women in Australia had descended to since Federation ... Morals became even more conservative, and bohemianism was a dirty word.¹⁹

Frustrated by this parochial and conservative art establishment, and feeling 'stuck' with her art, in 1950 Lempriere left Australia for Paris and London with her husband. She held solo exhibitions in Paris, London, Germany, the United States and the Netherlands, establishing an international reputation while remaining relatively unknown in Australia.²⁰ In Paris she studied drawing, line and composition with Fernand Léger, and the use of colour with Fred Klein.²¹ Lempriere's time in Paris had a profound effect on her sense of identity as an artist, and she was deeply affected by contemporary artists who painted 'what was inside them, not what they had been told';²² for Lempriere, the internal was Australia, 'the country by which I am artistically fed'.²³

Inspiration and appropriation

A work dated 1949, *Self-portrait with Aboriginal motifs*,²⁴ suggests that Lempriere was already familiar with Aboriginal art and culture while still living in Sydney, although most of her early references to Aboriginal themes date from her Paris and London years in the 1950s, with works such as *Crocodile hunters* (1953), *Kurungal with shield* (1956) and *Ceremonial tree* (1957).²⁵ Her exposure to Aboriginal culture may have been primarily through books; in 1954, the Australian UNESCO Committee for Visual Arts published *Australia: Aboriginal paintings—Arnhem Land*, which included work by prominent Australian artist Margaret Preston. In the introduction, English art historian Herbert Read speculated that 'the mythical figures of Aboriginal legend were authentic relatives of the heroes of classical European tradition which echo sympathetically in our collective conscience'.²⁶ Lempriere's husband worked for UNESCO in the early 1950s;²⁷ Lempriere may have been aware of, and influenced by, Read's juxtaposition of Aboriginal art with European mythology.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Aboriginal culture was largely represented by artefacts obtained by anthropologists during inland expeditions, and displayed as

ethnographic or scientific curiosities in ethnographic or natural-history museums, rather than in art galleries.²⁸ A noted example is the collection of Western Arnhem Land bark paintings and artefacts acquired by Walter Baldwin Spencer and donated to the National Museum of Victoria from 1912 onwards.²⁹ In 1929 the first major exhibition of Aboriginal art, titled *Primitive art*, was held at the National Museum of Victoria. It included bark paintings collected by Spencer, as well as work by Victoria's Tommy McRae.³⁰ Baddeley writes:

For the first time, items from Aboriginal culture were admired for their unique aesthetic significance and viewed as 'art' in the Western sense. The late 1920s witnessed the beginnings of a fascination with Aboriginal culture in Australian art. This was reflected in the use and appropriation of designs and motifs from Aboriginal art in the work of a number of Australian artists.³¹

In the 1920s Margaret Preston helped stimulate a new public interest in Aboriginal art and culture. Inspired by her travels around Australia, Preston wrote widely about Aboriginal art and culture,

Helen Lempriere, *Eingana creating Man*, n.d.,
oil on canvas, 65.0 × 81.0 cm. 1996.5001,
donated by Helen Lempriere and Keith Wood
estate 1996, Grainger Museum Collection,
University of Melbourne. © Reproduced
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in articles such as *Art for crafts: Aboriginal art artfully applied* (1924), *The Indigenous art of Australia* (1925) and *The application of Aboriginal designs* (1930).³² Preston believed that Aboriginal art was part of the visual heritage of all Australians,³³ and that 'the adaptation of these designs by non-Aborigines was sophisticated, enlightened, and necessary for the development of Australian art'.³⁴ For Preston, Aboriginal themes and motifs provided the 'key to establishing a national art that reflected the soul of the vast and ancient continent of Australia'.³⁵ The search for a national art by white Australians like Preston has pointedly been described as an identity problem, stemming from artists being 'painfully aware of the derivative and displaced nature of their British culture'.³⁶ Thomas posits that one way for artists to create a distinct Australian iconography was to incorporate Australian Indigenous culture into art and design.³⁷

Preston's early adaptations of Aboriginal themes and motifs for design and decorative purposes did not acknowledge spiritual or cultural significance or content.³⁸ Derogatory appellations of Preston included the withering 'Mother

of Kitsch Australiana'.³⁹ Topliss, however, defends Preston's advocacy of Indigenous art as following the example of European modernists such as Pablo Picasso and the *Blaue Reiter* group, with the initially purely aesthetic approach ultimately transforming into 'a strong nationalist and anti-colonial ethic'.⁴⁰ McCaughey also suggests that, by the 1940s, Preston's use of Aboriginal motifs was 'broader, with a better understanding of its content and purpose'.⁴¹ Preston's continuing research into Aboriginal culture had engendered an understanding that Aboriginal art was not based on visual representation, but on knowledge of the land and all things growing in and on it; she wrote in 1941: 'Know your subject and paint your knowledge'.⁴²

Other artists, such as Jacqueline Hick and Roma Thompson, incorporated Aboriginal themes into their work. A member of the George Bell modernist group, Thompson produced several works in the 1940s and 1950s that 'reflected her interest in Aboriginal art and its application. In particular, she felt a strong affinity for the simplicity of Aboriginal forms as well as for their "Australianness"'.⁴³ In the 1930s, potters Olive Nock and Marina Shaw produced innovative

and distinctive ceramics that combined abstracted Aboriginal designs with Art Deco style, and in the 1950s designers Anne Outlaw, Alexandra (Nan) MacKenzie and Frances Burke designed textiles for public buildings, including the Qantas International Terminal at Sydney Airport, that incorporated images or symbols derived from Aboriginal art.⁴⁴ Croft offers a forgiving appraisal of these early designs, suggesting that:

The majority of these artists, who in today's world would be accused of appropriation, were for the most part well-intentioned in their efforts to treat Aboriginal visual culture with respect. Their works also acted as a counter-balance to the racist and demeaning depiction of Aboriginal stereotypes which appeared in the first half of the century.⁴⁵

She adds, however, that these artists' efforts to create a new Australian style using Indigenous art, culture and designs were 'safely at arms-length from the people who rightfully had claim to the stylistic elements being appropriated'.⁴⁶

Helen Lempriere, *The Arunda*, c. 1950–58, oil on canvas, 116.0 × 89.5 cm. 1996.5002, donated by Helen Lempriere and Keith Wood estate 1996, Grainger Museum Collection, University of Melbourne. © Reproduced courtesy Perpetual Trustees.

Representative works in the Grainger Museum

Lempriere's works from the 1950s–60s incorporate Aboriginal themes that are largely 'abstract, surreal and symbolic'.⁴⁷ Her use of imagery is described by Burr:

Primordial legends, superstitions and aboriginal ceremonies have for Helen Lempriere a poetic mystery that has permeated her consciousness so deeply that it has become a haunting image of life ... The figures are formed by distinct hints from stylised rock drawings. These schematic, briefly indicated silhouettes seem to emerge ethereally, like spirits from amorphous landscape surroundings that depend for their existence on eerie vaporous shapes which only imply identifiable forms.⁴⁸

Nimbawah lost (see page 66) depicts the Nimbawah Man, a Dreamtime creator, who becomes lost in Arnhem Land and ultimately transforms himself into a rock formation.⁴⁹

The undated painting *Eingana creating Man* (see page 69) depicts a female rainbow serpent—creator



of the universe.⁵⁰ Kerr notes that Lempriere painted in colours that owe nothing to Aboriginal art, and that the general effect of works such as this 'more closely resembles the surreal frottages of Max Ernst—with similar echoes of fin de siècle symbolism'.⁵¹ A preface to the catalogue for Lempriere's Paris, Amsterdam and London exhibitions in 1963 contended that 'she does not attempt to illustrate aboriginal cults or legends ... she seeks to emphasise their mystic qualities and to translate them into (European) visual experiences'.⁵²

An address label on the back of *The Arunda* suggests that this painting (see page 71) was made while Lempriere was living in Paris, between 1950 and 1958. The title presumably refers to the Arrernte people of Central Australia, whose Dreaming stories were some of the first recorded by outsiders.⁵³ Burr writes that Lempriere's works 'are concerned with human situations, so figures are always present, sometimes tangible and terrestrial, at others phantasmagorical'.⁵⁴ The central figure in *The Arunda* suggests the latter, and is surrounded by vivid, otherworldly colours that complement the mystical representation of the subject.

Cultural borrowings

Lempriere's works of the 1950s–60s were inspired largely by descriptions of Aboriginal myths and legends found in anthropological texts.⁵⁵

Unlike Margaret Preston, however, Lempriere was more interested in 'expressing the atmosphere evoked in the legends and the relationship these mythical figures had to the land than in copying specific forms'.⁵⁶ Sometime in the early 1970s, Lempriere and her husband visited Central Australia and made a documentary film about the region, where the couple would almost certainly have encountered Indigenous art.⁵⁷ Works such as *Man and kangaroo* (c. 1965–70) are a striking contrast to the earlier works, notably in Lempriere's depiction of Aboriginal rites and ceremony and her use of earth tones, referencing the ochres used by Aboriginal artists. This work (opposite) represents a radical stylistic shift for Lempriere, who was by now seeking to represent Aboriginal culture in a more direct way. Lempriere also experimented with materials to create a more 'authentic' look, often manipulating paper to emulate the rough texture of bark.⁵⁸

More broadly, Cooke suggests that non-Indigenous Australian artists who appropriated Aboriginal

themes acknowledged their sources and were operating 'within the parameters of a developing nationalism' in Australia.⁵⁹ Croft also refers to:

another, less complicated place and time, when the bower bird approach to art and culture was accompanied by an essentially anthropological manner—an essence that was rather innocent in its intent [which] harks back to a time when the artists' purpose, through their work, was truly to honour the creators of the work which initially inspired them.⁶⁰

The influence of Aboriginal art on the development of a new national identity is, however, interrogated by Thomas:

'Influence', in this history, is perhaps not the right word, because that implies an active power, that is exercised by an influencing artist or form, upon another artist or another work. Under colonial circumstances, we might assume that the active party is not on the indigenous side, but on that of the dominant settler population.⁶¹

Helen Lempriere, *Man and kangaroo*, c. 1965–70, monotype print, 43.0 × 57.0 cm. 04.0080, donated by Helen Lempriere and Keith Wood estate 1996, Grainger Museum Collection, University of Melbourne. © Reproduced courtesy Perpetual Trustees.



In the 1960s, the cross-cultural dynamic between the white and Aboriginal populations began to shift, with social and political events influencing choices made by non-Indigenous artists:

The Referendum of 1967, granting indigenous people full Australian citizenship, foreshadowed the greater struggles for land rights and self-determination which emerged in the 1970s and 80s. As a result, Aboriginal culture was viewed in a different light and issues arose regarding indigenous appropriation, authenticity and ownership.⁶²

We do not know Lempriere's views on Aboriginal self-determination and the appropriation of Aboriginal themes; we do know that her thematic material changed in the late 1960s following travels to Cambodia and the Great Barrier Reef.⁶³ In writing about the early use of Aboriginal themes by Australian artists, Cooke sums up both the controversy and the quandary: 'appropriation has been part of the history of art from its very beginning—the difference being that this appropriation was the art of a colonised people'.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The Grainger Museum's collection of Helen Lempriere's works from the 1950s–60s serves as a significant illustration of the understanding of Aboriginal culture by a non-Indigenous woman artist in the mid-20th century. Lempriere's use of Aboriginal themes and motifs occurred in the context of a developing Australian nationhood, the post-war cultural environment for women artists, and Lempriere's personal need to stay connected to her native Australia while living overseas. The collection also serves as an important cultural record of the appropriation of Aboriginal culture by white Australian artists, and of a period of history that foreshadowed greater control by the Indigenous peoples of Australia over their own art and imagery.

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1 See 'Grainger Museum: Search collections', opus.its.unimelb.edu.au/gm/imu.php?request=search.

- 2 Information provided by Grainger Museum staff.
- 3 Elinor Wrobel for Woolloomooloo Gallery, 'Press release: Helen Lempriere 1907–1991', 1993 (copy held in Grainger Museum administrative files); Woolloomooloo Gallery, *Helen Lempriere: Retrospective exhibition Part II—Paintings from 1950's–60's* (exhibition catalogue), Sydney: Woolloomooloo Gallery, 1994 (copy held in Grainger Museum Collection); also Leslie Hetherington, email correspondence with Gloria Gamboz, 20 January 2018.
- 4 Joan Kerr, *Heritage: The national women's art book: 500 works by 500 Australian women artists from colonial times to 1955*, Sydney: Craftsman House, 1995, p. 388.
- 5 Les Hetherington, 'Lempriere, Dora Elizabeth (1873–1958)', *People Australia*, Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, peopleaustralia.anu.edu.au/biography/lempriere-dora-elizabeth-18520/text33896, viewed 16 October 2017; Leslie Hetherington, email correspondence with Gloria Gamboz, 4 April, 14 May and 19 October 2017.
- 6 Kay Dreyfus, 'Grainger, George Percy (1882–1961)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 9, Melbourne University Press, 1983, published online by National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/grainger-george-percy-6448.
- 7 Helen Lempriere, interview with Hazel de Berg, 31 August 1965. Sound recording, DeB 114, Hazel de Berg Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- 8 Hetherington, 'Lempriere, Dora Elizabeth (1873–1958)'.
- 9 Peter W. Perry, 'Colquhoun, Archibald Douglas (Archie) (1894–1983)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 17, Melbourne University Press, 2007, published online by National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/colquhoun-archibald-douglas-archie-12339/text22167.

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- 11 Joan Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', in *Helen Lempriere: Retrospective exhibition Part I: Paintings from 1930's-50's* (exhibition catalogue), Sydney: Woolloomooloo Gallery, 1993, p. 3 (copy held in Grainger Museum Collection).
- 12 Max Teichmann, Jorgensen, Justus (1893–1975), *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 14, Melbourne University Press, 1996, published online by National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/jorgensen-justus-10644/text18919.
- 13 Hetherington, 'Lempriere, Dora Elizabeth (1873–1958)'.
- 14 Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', p. 3.
- 15 Brenda L. Croft, 'You must remember this ...', in *Motif & meaning: Aboriginal influences in Australian art, 1930–1970* (exhibition catalogue), Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, 1999, p. 17.
- 16 Anne Sanders and Jim Berryman, 'Visual arts', in *The encyclopedia of women & leadership in twentieth-century Australia*, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2014, www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0448b.htm.
- 17 Sanders and Berryman, 'Visual arts'.
- 18 Helen Topliss, *Modernism and feminism: Australian women artists, 1900–1940*, Sydney: Craftsman House, 1996, p. 38.
- 19 Caroline Ambrus, *Australian women artists: First Fleet to 1945: History, hearsay and her say*, Canberra: Irrepressible Press, 1992, p. 161.
- 20 Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', pp. 10–11. Lempriere's works are held in major public collections in Australia, the US and Israel, including the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Queensland Art Gallery, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery. See 'Lempriere, Helen Dora', in *The new McCulloch's encyclopedia of Australian art*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2006, p. 606; Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', p. 11.
- 21 Hetherington, email correspondence.
- 22 Lempriere, interview with Hazel de Berg.
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- 24 Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', p. 13.
- 25 Hetherington, email correspondence; Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere'.
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- 27 Hetherington, email correspondence.
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- 32 See Elizabeth Butel (ed.), *Selected writings: Margaret Preston*, Sydney: ETT Imprint, 2015.
- 33 Glenn R. Cooke, 'Aboriginal motifs in the decorative arts, "an art for Australia from Australians"', in *Motif & meaning*, p. 14.
- 34 Catherine De Lorenzo, 'Be Aboriginal', in *A changing relationship: Aboriginal themes in Australian art 1938–1988* (exhibition catalogue), Sydney: S.H. Ervin Gallery, National Trust of Australia (NSW), 1988, p. 18.
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- 37 Thomas, 'Dangerous territory', p. 26.
- 38 Patrick McCaughey, *Strange country: Why Australian painting matters*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Publishing, 2004, p. 132.
- 39 De Lorenzo, 'Be Aboriginal', p. 14.
- 40 Topliss, *Modernism and feminism*, p. 126.
- 41 McCaughey, *Strange country*, p. 130.
- 42 Margaret Preston, 'New development in Australian art', *Australia National Journal*, 1 May 1941, reprinted in Elizabeth Butel (ed.), *Art and Australia by Margaret Preston: Selected writings 1920–1950*, Sydney: Richmond Ventures, 2003, p. 83.
- 43 Kerr, *Heritage*, p. 296.
- 44 Baddeley, 'Motif & meaning', p. 5.
- 45 Croft, 'You must remember this ...', p. 19.
- 46 Croft, 'You must remember this ...', p. 19.
- 47 Baddeley, 'Motif & meaning', p. 4.
- 48 James Burr, 'Foreword' (London, 1965), reprinted in *Helen Lempriere: Retrospective exhibition Part II*, p. [1].
- 49 Unknown artist, *The man Nimbarwab*, 1948, Art Gallery of New South Wales, www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/9281, viewed 24 October 2017.
- 50 Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', p. 7.
- 51 Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', p. 7.
- 52 Anonymous preface to *Lempriere exhibitions / expositions / exposities '63* (catalogue of exhibition at Galerie Furstenberg, Paris, and Kunstzaal Magdalene Sothmann, Amsterdam), London: 1963, cited in Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', p. 7.
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- 54 Burr, 'Foreword', p. [1].
- 55 Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', p. 6.
- 56 Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', p. 6.
- 57 Hetherington, email correspondence.
- 58 Hetherington, email correspondence; Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', p. 7.
- 59 Cooke, 'Aboriginal motifs in the decorative arts', p. 9.
- 60 Croft, 'You must remember this ...', p. 22.
- 61 Thomas, 'Dangerous territory', p. 24.
- 62 Baddeley, 'Motif & meaning', p. 5.
- 63 Kerr, 'Helen Lempriere', pp. 7–8.
- 64 Cooke, 'Aboriginal motifs in the decorative arts', p. 9.