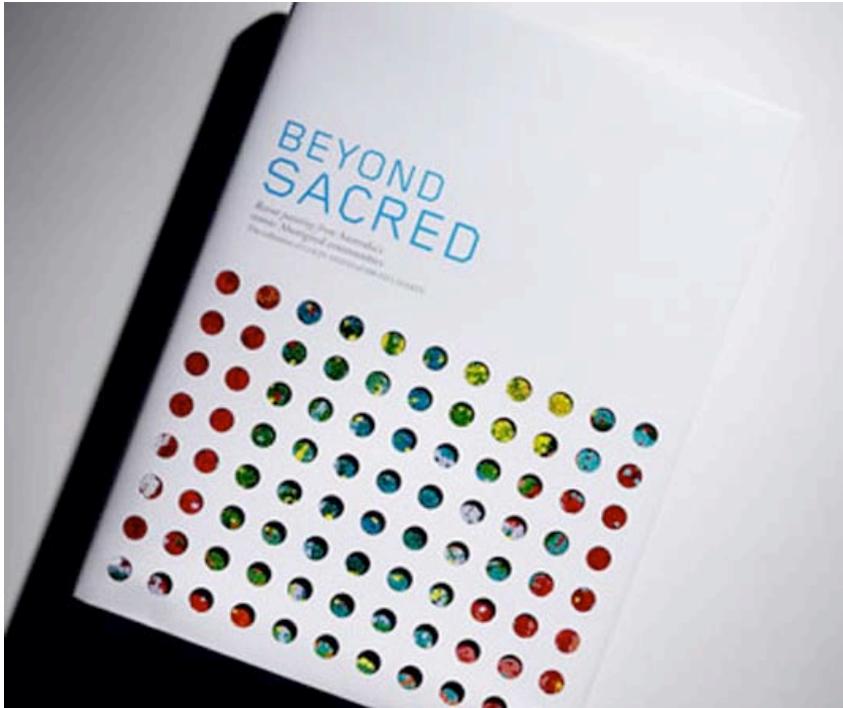




BEYOND SACRED: BUY THIS BOOK!

Dear Reader,

I want you to [buy this book](#), and I will tell you why.



Beyond Sacred: recent paintings from Australia's remote Aboriginal communities: the collection of Colin and Elizabeth Laverty (Prahran, Vic: Hardie Grant Books, 2008).

My interest in Australian Aboriginal art started quite by accident. In the fall of 1988 we were in New York City for the weekend, touring the art galleries in Soho in between attending evening performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. At one gallery, a friend asked what we were doing Sunday afternoon (when galleries are closed) and advised us that there was a show at the Asia Society that was not to be missed.

The show was *Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia*. It quite literally changed my life.

The [catalog](#) for the exhibition still does an excellent job of conveying the substance of the exhibition with its bipolar emphasis on bark paintings from the north and acrylics from the desert. I vaguely remember reading the wall texts and gaining a rudimentary appreciation of the plot of the show. But mostly what I remember is being blown away by the color and abstraction of the works from Papunya. (Remember that at this point in time acrylic painting elsewhere in the desert was brand new: the Yuendumu doors were four years old; *Art from the Great Sandy Desert* had introduced Balgo painters to Australian audiences only a year before.)





The bark paintings in *Dreamings* left me cold. Perhaps I was missing the shock of the new, for the crocodiles, turtles, and serpents (if not the mimihis and sorcery figures) of the Top End were vaguely familiar and vaguely what I expected of Aboriginal art. Indeed, several years later when I was sharing photographs of works in our collection with a local curator she remarked, unimpressed, "You don't have too many pictures with animals in them, do you?"

I suspect this is a fairly common reaction among those exposed to Aboriginal art for the first time. The dazzle, the opticality, the color of Western Desert art have an immediate appeal to Western eyes that have lived with Abstract Expressionism, Pop, Op, and the graphic traditions of modern advertising for most of our lives.

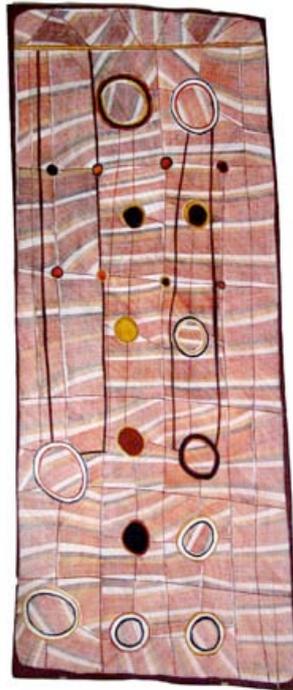
Two years later, we traveled to Australia for the first time and bought our first painting. It was a backpacker special, and as classic an example of the genre as you could ask for (left, Wayne Bright Tjangala, *Rockhole Dreaming*, 1990). Over the years that followed as first Fay Bell and then Janis Stanton and Daphne Williams opened the doors of Papunya Tula to us, and Diane Mossenson showed us the art that blossomed in Western Australia, we remained staunchly enthusiastic about the art of the Western Desert, true to that first rush of enthusiasm.



Bark painting and the arts of Arnhem Land remained a closed book.

And then, around the turn of the century, on our fourth or fifth visit to Australia, we went to the Art Gallery of New South Wales (as we did on every trip). And once again I saw art that very literally changed my life.

There on display were four large, abstract bark paintings by John Mawurndjul. Suddenly, for the first time, I was able to see the artistry of the format, to get beyond the accumulated preconceptions and to see a vast genre of Indigenous art with clear eyes. I approached the paintings to examine the details of the brushwork and to discover the name of the artist. On the label I also saw the following words: "From the collection of Colin and Elizabeth Laverty."



John Mawurndjul, *Mardayin Ceremony*, 2003, courtesy of Maningrida Arts and Crafts

This is not one of the paintings from the Laverty Collection I saw at the AGNSW, but is stylistically quite similar.

And now, let me bring this long story to a close. The revelation that was granted to me by the grace of the loan from the Laverty collection led quickly to the purchase of our first work on bark, a *Moon Dreaming* by Mick Kubarkku. My interest grew rapidly, piqued by stories of the Elcho Island Memorial and the Yirrkala Bark Petition. The intellectual outreach of the Yolngu, so different from the dense secrecy of the people of the deserts, engaged me in a wholly new way.

A few years later, on the occasion of a major show of works on bark at the Kluge-Ruhe Collection, Margo Smith offered me the opportunity to present my first public lecture on Aboriginal art, specifically on representations of the Djangka'wu and Wagilag Sisters stories, and the Mangallili clan lore painted by Narratjin Maymuru and his family.

The urge to write about this art that was born with that lecture took me through countless discarded drafts of articles, outlines for books I discovered had already been written, better than I ever could, and finally, three years and ten days ago, to the first post on this blog. (Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it focused on the Pintupi and the art of the Western Desert.)

In all the years since that epiphanic encounter at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, I've been fortunate to continue my engagements with the Laverty collection in museums around the world and even in their home. But none of those meetings offers the breadth and the scope of what is contained in *Beyond Sacred*. There are hundreds of works illustrated in this volume, with brief essays from a Who's Who of art centre luminaries from Andrew Blake and Apolline Kohen to Una Rey and Will Stubbs.

The book's four major essays, commissioned by the Lavertys to explore the theme of Aboriginal art as contemporary art, form a most illuminating jigsaw approach to the question. Howard Morphy's "The Laverty Collection: Exploring the Qualities of Aboriginal Art" seeks to illuminate essential aspects of the artistic tradition as embodied in the act and art of collecting. In this respect, his approach dovetails neatly with the opening premise of Judith Ryan's historically oriented contribution, "Shock of the Ancient Made New":

Despite the cynics who regularly declare that Indigenous Australian art has passed its peak and will never be the same again, the greatest collections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art can only be assembled by true believers in the maxim that the best art is what is being produced now. This philosophy permeates and underlies many of the finest international collections of early Modernism and the pre-eminent collections of contemporary Indigenous Australian art.

Nick Waterlow's "The Contemporary and Aboriginal Art" also takes Modernism as its starting point, comparing the emergence of that movement with the arrival of acrylic painting from the desert, and chronicling the entrance of Aboriginal art into the contemporary museum. My own contribution, "Transmuted Traditions: The Modernity of Australian Aboriginal Art," takes the tension between ethnography and fine art in the museum world as the occasion for discussing changes in both curation of the art and the artistic traditions themselves.

As I noted in an [earlier commentary](#) on *Beyond Sacred*, I had no hint what my co-authors were up to while I was writing my own piece, and I think that one of the delights of the written words in this book is the way in which the same themes emerge in the essays, and often the same artists as exemplars of those themes. And yet each essay is quite different in tone, approach, and focus.

But the greatest appeal of *Beyond Sacred*, after all these years, are the paintings and sculpture themselves. In paging through the book, I found heart-stopping moments, like the sudden apparition of Rammev Ramsey's *Warlawoon Country Series #1* (2005), a work totally unlike any other by the artist I have ever seen, and perhaps unlike any other Indigenous accomplishment. Or now, looking

through it again as I write this essay, I come across work from last year by Wukun Wanambi, dumbfoundingly beautiful versions of the work on [display in Darwin](#) this year.

You can sample the delights of this collection now at [BeyondSacred.com](#). But I urge you to go beyond that sample, and give yourself and your friends the chance to indulge in the breadth of the Lavertys' vision of the contemporary art of Indigenous Australia. Buy this book! You won't be disappointed.

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Fri - September 26, 2008