

Resource Guide

The Arts—Visual Arts

The information and resources contained in this guide provide a platform for teachers and educators to consider how to effectively embed important ideas around reconciliation, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and contributions, within the specific subject/learning area of [The Arts- Visual Arts](#). Please note that this guide is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, and that teaching staff are encouraged to consult with their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and [critically evaluate resources](#), in engaging with the material contained in the guide.

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Please be aware this guide may contain references to names and works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are now deceased. External links may also include names and images of those who are now deceased.

Background and Introduction to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts

“I believe that art is a language for interpreting who you are, and I can’t find any satisfaction other than painting... Aboriginal people have always had a vast, rich culture and I am part of this. There are many things, which are too numerous to mention about the treatment of [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples] but through my art I have identity and strength.”— Raymond Meeks, Aboriginal visual artist.

Maintaining great cultural significance, the oldest form of visual art by Australia’s First Peoples are rock engravings that date back at least 60,000 years. It is important to appreciate that, while this guide predominantly focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, perspectives and visual arts conventions since European colonisation, visual arts has been an integral part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for thousands of years, and continues to play an active and important part in cultural life to this day.

While rock art and engravings represent some of the oldest forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts, the range of traditional visual arts practices has also included bark painting, wood sculpting, and the burning in of designs on timber; the carving of weapons and other objects or tools; basket weaving; the ornate decoration of objects such as boomerangs; the carving, painting and feather decoration of burial poles; the etching, and ochre painting, of designs onto possum cloaks; and the creation of headdresses and ornaments for ceremonial purposes, personal adornment, or gifts. More recently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists have also engaged with creating paintings on canvas; works on paper; photography and photo media; video and installation art; and digital and new media. Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists often use a mix of old and new visual arts materials. Some of these practices have been more common or specific to particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander geo-cultural groups compared to others, with the diversity of visual arts practices indeed highlighting the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities more generally.

On a related note, it is important to appreciate that traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts are also tied to a strong and simultaneous use of cross-arts frameworks and features such as dance, drama and music. That is, visual artworks are often involved in corroboree¹ events— ceremonial amalgamations of song, dance, music and visual symbols or stimuli to provide a dramatic representation of, and to pass on information about, the Dreaming.

Across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, visual arts have maintained incredible value in community and cultural life, far beyond commercial or aesthetic value alone. It is often the role, and responsibility, of an artist to carry significant socio-cultural and spiritual messages through their art, and to appropriately render and protect stories, sites, characters and symbols imbued with sacred meaning according to carefully established cultural-artistic conventions. As Yorta Yorta artist, Lin Onus, articulates, “the [Aboriginal] artist sees himself or herself as the custodian of a story or image—it is the custodian’s responsibility to ‘look after’ the story and

¹It is important to point out that there can be great diversity in the forms or features of a traditional corroboree. ‘Corroboree’ is a very generic word that was in fact coined by Europeans in an attempt to imitate a term from just one Aboriginal language of NSW. There is indeed no single corroboree structure, style or story with a number of different corroborees existing both between and within distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander linguistic-cultural groups.

image and to pass it on undamaged to a new generation in the future... not only are they superb craftspeople but they have other important roles as law-keepers, cultural repositories and leaders-by-example... [The artists'] role in community cohesiveness should not be underestimated. I believe that artists' relationships and responsibilities to the greater Aboriginal community are paramount."

Given the tradition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual artists to be entrusted to maintain core meanings and messages through their work according to established cultural practices and parameters, artistic concerns around authenticity, provenance and appropriation are of particular importance when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts.

Overall, acknowledging the historical and continued significance of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts is a pivotal precursor to researching and reflecting on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, perspectives and artistic conventions have entered into, or have been represented in, more contemporary 'Western' visual arts domains. The following pages of this guide will provide a platform for Visual Arts teachers to effectively engage with the latter in particular.

Timeline of Key Dates in the Contemporary History of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts

This timeline chronologically lists some of the key dates in the more recent history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts and/or in regard to the relationship between visual arts and reconciliation more generally.

- **60,000+ years ago:**
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia have maintained longstanding conventions and conceptualisations pertaining to visual arts for tens of thousands of years.
- **1880s:**
 - [Mickey of Ulladulla](#), [William Barrack of Coranderrk](#), [Oscar from Cooktown](#) and [Tommy McCrae](#), used pencil, watercolour and crayon to document daily life, including ceremony and other cultural practices, and interactions with newly arrived Europeans.
- **1855:**
 - Bark paintings are exhibited at the Universal Exposition in Paris.
- **1948:**
 - The first community art centre was established at Pukatja ([Ernabella](#), Central Australia).
- **1953:**
 - Albert Namatjira presented to the Queen in Canberra.
- **1955:**
 - Albert Namatjira elected as an honorary member of the [Royal Art Society of New South Wales](#).
- **1957:**
 - Albert Namatjira was one of the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to be granted full citizenship rights.
- **1958-9:**
 - Tony Tuckson, Deputy Director of the Art Gallery of NSW, acquires a set of [Tiwi burial poles](#), which are displayed the following year in the foyer of the Gallery. This is one of the first instances that Aboriginal art is displayed as fine art, as opposed to ethnographic artefact.
- **1960-1**
 - [Australian Aboriginal Art: bark paintings, carved figures, sacred and secular object](#), is the first major exhibition of Aboriginal art to tour nationally.
- **1966:**
 - A work by [David Malangi](#) is reproduced (without his permission) on [the first Australian dollar note](#).

- **1971:**

- The [Papunya Tula Art Movement](#), often considered the 'beginning' of 'contemporary' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts, started with the encouragement of European art teacher, [Geoffrey Bardon](#). Beginning with a mural on the external wall of the school yard, the art movement at Papunya soon evolved in both style, technique and imagery. Just one year later, the Papunya Tula Coop— wholly owned and directed by Pintupi artists— was established to promote individual artists, provide economic development to their communities, and assist in the maintenance of their cultural heritage.

- [Kaapa Tjampitjinpa](#) wins equal first prize at the Caltex Art Award in Alice Springs.

- The Commonwealth Government sponsored the establishment of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd. which played a major role in supporting the establishment of credible outlets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts in most State capitals for over twenty years.

- The [Aboriginal Flag](#), designed by Aboriginal artist and activist, [Harold Thomas](#), was first flown at Victoria Square in Adelaide on National Aborigines Day (July 12th), before being chosen as the flag for the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972.

- **1973:**

- The Aboriginal Arts Board is set up to raise awareness of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts.

- **1976:**

- The Aboriginal Arts Board established the Aboriginal Artist's Agency (AAA), which coordinated copyright issues and promoted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts in the contemporary art world.

- **1981:**

- Papunya painters and their work were publically recognised as part of contemporary Australian art when three Papunya paintings were selected for the [Australian Perspecta 1981 exhibition](#) at the Art Gallery of NSW.

- **1984:**

- The inaugural National Aboriginal Art Award, now known as National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award ([NATSIAA](#)), was hosted by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

- **1987-88:**

- One of Australia's most powerful and important works of art, [The Aboriginal Memorial](#), was created. The Memorial, a collaborative work involving 43 artists of Ramingining in Arnhem Land, is an installation of 200 painted hollow log coffins dedicated to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who lost their lives defending their Country since European colonisation. It is currently on display at the National Gallery of Australia.

- **1988:**

- As part of Australia's bicentenary celebrations, Michael Nelson Tjakamarra is

commissioned to design a [mosaic](#) for the main forecourt of Australia's new parliament house (in 1993 he chiselled out a stone from the mosaic as part of a protest against anti-Mabo legislation).

- Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls are the first Aboriginal artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale.
- **1997:**
 - The Venice Biennale includes works by artists Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson.
- **1991:**
 - [Tandanya: National Cultural Institute](#) is opened, and continues to be Australia's only public gallery solely dedicated to Aboriginal art.
- **1992:**
 - The [Torres Strait Islander Flag](#), designed by late artist [Bernard Namok](#) from Thursday Island, was recognised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and given equal prominence with the Aboriginal flag.
- **1994:**
 - The Art Gallery of NSW opens the [Yiribana Gallery](#), a permanent gallery dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.
- **1995:**
 - Designed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists respectively, both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags were officially recognised as a 'Flag of Australia' under the [Flags Act of 1953](#).
- **1997:**
 - The Federal Court of Australia declared that Aboriginal artist, Harold Thomas, was the owner of the copyright in the design of the Aboriginal flag.
- [Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa](#) (1972) by Central Desert artist John Warangkula Tjupurrula sells for \$206,000 breaking all auction records for works by Aboriginal artists.
- **1999:**
 - The National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association ([NIAAA](#)) launched the 'Label of Authenticity,' which was designed to provide a national certification system for the authenticity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts. The Label was used to show that goods or services were "derived from a work of art created by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person or people, [and] reproduced or produced and manufactured by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."
- **2003:**
 - Richard Bell wins NATSIAA with a painting called [Scientia E Metaphysica \(Bell's Theorem\)](#), which includes the text 'Aboriginal art, it's a white thing'. In his lengthy [manifesto](#), Bell critiques the Aboriginal arts industry, which he considers treats art like a

commodity.

- **2007:**
 - [Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri](#)'s work, *Warlugulong*, sold to the National Gallery of Australia for \$2.4million, representing the highest priced Aboriginal artwork in history.
- **2005:**
 - Following the abolishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission ([ATSIC](#)), the entire [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Art collection](#) became part of the collection of the National Museum of Australia, where the objects can be preserved, studied and displayed in the future. This collection is highly significant, illustrating an important part of Australia's history, and entwined with the story of the relationship between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from 1967 to 2005.
- **2006:**
 - The Musée du quai Branly in Paris [commissions eight Aboriginal artists](#) to produce works for the ceilings and façade of the building that represent the Aboriginal art movement. The largest international commission of Indigenous art, artists included John Mawurndjul, Gulumbu Yunupingu, Michael Riley, Judy Watson, Tommy Watson, Ningura Napurrula, Paddy Bedford, and Lena Nyadbi.
- **2007:**
 - [Australia Council for the Arts](#) established its inaugural annual [National Indigenous Arts Awards](#).
 - The inaugural [Australian Indigenous Art Triennial](#), *culture warriors*, is launched at the National Gallery of Australia
- **2010:**
 - Developed by the Australia Council for the Arts, the [Indigenous Art Code](#) (the Code) was publicly launched. The purpose of the Code is to establish standards for dealings between Dealers and Artists to ensure fair and ethical trade in Indigenous art.
- **2012:**
 - [Tony Albert](#) became the first Aboriginal Australian to be appointed as official war artist, and was deployed to one of the Army's special Regional Surveillance Unit's North West Mobile Force. His artworks honour the dedication and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to the defence of Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Artists and Artworks

There is a great multitude of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists who have played an active and important role in the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts in Australia, and/or play a very active role to this day. The following search tools may provide a useful platform for you to research Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual artists in your local area, or across Australia:

- Aboriginal Art Directory [Artist listings](#)
- Aboriginal Art Directory [AboriginalArtSearch, Popular Viewed Artists and Artist Slideshows search tools](#)
- Australian Indigenous Art Market (AIAM) [Artists](#)

In finding out more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual artists, you might also like to find out more about their *artworks*. As well as visiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Art Centres, Exhibitions and Events, the following search tools may provide a useful platform for you to research a range of different Visual Arts creations by these artists:

- Aboriginal Art Directory [Gallery](#) (with a range of different browsing sub-filters)
- Australian Indigenous Art Market (AIAM) [Artworks](#)

Alongside engaging with the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual artists, you may also consider researching examples of non-Indigenous artists who have played an important role in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts, and reconciliation, such as [Adrian Newstead](#), [Geoffrey Bardon](#) and [Rex Batterby](#).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts Centres/Organisations

A great multitude of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts centres/organisations are active today, and have played a very active role in the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts in Australia. The following search tools may provide a useful platform for you to locate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts centres/organisations in your local area, or across Australia:

- Aboriginal Art Association of Australia (AAAA) [Meet the Members](#) directory
- Aboriginal Art Centre Hub Western Australia [links and resources](#)
- Aboriginal Art Directory [Aboriginal Art Centre vendor listings](#)
- Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists (ANKAAA) [Art Centre Directory](#)
- Desert [Art Centre Locations](#)
- Indigenous Art Centre Alliance [Member Art Centres and Map](#)

Note that you may also find that, in your local area, it is actually your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language²/Culture Centre, Land Council, or another community organisation that acts as the main host or representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts matters.

² For a list of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language Centres, please see the Languages—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages guide.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts Exhibitions and Celebratory Events

The list below features examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts festivals or celebratory events.

- [Australia Council for the Arts National Indigenous Arts Awards](#)
- [Cairns Indigenous Art Fair](#)
- [Clarence Valley Indigenous Art Award](#)
- [Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair](#)
- [Desert Mob](#)
- [Indigenous Ceramic Art Award](#)
- [Merrepen Arts Festival](#)
- [Mowanjum Festival](#)
- [NSW Reconciliation Council Schools' Reconciliation Challenge](#)
- [TARNATHI Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art](#)
- [Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award](#)
- [The Gold Coast Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award](#)
- [Victorian Indigenous Art Awards](#)
- [Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards](#)

To search for active and archived Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts exhibitions or collections, you may wish to use online directories such as:

- Aboriginal Art Directory [Exhibitions](#)
- AIATIS [Art and Artefacts Collection](#)
- Art Gallery NSW [Collection: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art](#)
- Art Gallery of South Australia [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collection](#)
- Art Gallery WA [Past](#), [Current](#) and [Future](#) Exhibitions
- Australian Museum [Aboriginal Art](#)

- Museum of Contemporary Art Australia [Collection](#)
- National Gallery of Australia [Collections: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art](#)
- National Galley of Victoria [Collection: Australian Art](#)
- National Museum Australia [Now Showing](#) and [Past Exhibitions](#)
- Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art [Indigenous Australian Art Collection](#)
- Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery [Collections and research: Indigenous cultures](#)

For more information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander festivals/celebrations pertaining to The Arts more broadly, you may also like to visit:

- <http://www.australia.com/en/search.html?q=aboriginal+events>
- <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-arts/>
- <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-arts/national-indigenous-arts-awards/>
-
- <http://www.tourism.australia.com/aboriginal/festivals-and-events.aspx>

Other Online Guides/Reference Materials

- ABC Splash (2016) *Connecting with Aboriginal Desert Art*,
<http://splash.abc.net.au/home#!/media/1436318/connecting-with-aboriginal-desert-art>
- ABC Splash (2016) *Mervyn Street: Painting the Old Days*,
<http://splash.abc.net.au/home#!/media/1647437/mervyn-street-painting-the-old-days>
- Australia Council for the Arts (2007) *Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Visual Arts*,
http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/symphony/extension/richtext_redactor/getfile/?name=daaf1afd6d719315db5e5e174a1da961.pdf
- Board of Studies NSW (2006) *Protecting Australian Indigenous Art: ownership, copyright and marketing issues for NSW schools*, <http://ab-ed.bostes.nsw.edu.au/files/protecting-australian-indigenous-art.pdf>
- National Association for the Visual Arts (2016) *Code of Practice: Indigenous Ethics*,
https://visualarts.net.au/media/uploads/files/indigenous_ethics_3516.pdf
- National Film and Sound Archive (1988) *Dreamings, Through Indigenous Art*,
<http://dl.nfsa.gov.au/module/1426/>
- National Film and Sound Archive (2000) *Painting Country*,
<http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/painting-country/clip1/>
- Reconciliation Australia (2014) *Let's Talk... Art Culture and the Archibald Prize*,
<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Lets-talk-Art-culture-and-Archibald-Prize.pdf>
- Tasmanian Government (2018) *The Orb: Living Cultures*,
<https://www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures>

Reflective Questions for Visual Arts Staff and Students

- What are some of the distinct and diverse forms and features of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts protocols and practices? Can you identify any protocols and practices that are distinct to your local area, and how does the diversity across Australia reflect the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities more generally?
- How have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories influenced Australian visual arts, and what active role do these cultures and histories play today?
- What is the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts? Try to consider the question of value beyond economic and aesthetic value to consider also symbolic, social and spiritual value.
- What are some of the significant and simultaneous roles/responsibilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual artists in their communities? Why is it important to recognise the cultural and communicative roles and responsibilities within which artists' creative roles are situated?
- Why are questions of authenticity, provenance and appropriation important to consider in the context of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts?
- Choose to research an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander visual artist. What is the importance of his or her contributions to visual arts on either a local or (inter)national scale?
- What is the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts, and music, media, dance and/or dramatic arts? Why are these relationships important? How are they similar or different to non-Indigenous cross-arts collaboration, either in style or in purpose?"
- Where possible, organise an excursion to a public Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art exhibition. Were you able to learn about any of the artworks' stories or messages, and how did you respond to viewing and learning about the artworks? How were the artworks within the exhibition similar or different to non-Indigenous visual arts exhibitions that you have attended, or indeed any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander exhibitions that you have visited?
- How can artwork [visibly demonstrate respect](#) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and contributions?
- How might your school or early learning centre contribute to the celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts, and visual artists?
- How can embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories into the study and practice of Visual Arts help to foster reconciliation?