

ART FROM THE INSIDE¹

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Aboriginal Art has been an important part of the survival of our Peoples since the dawning of time. Our laws, our beginnings and the very fabric of our societies have been passed down through countless generations. Art took many forms, such as dance, paintings and the telling of our past events by people who were gifted in this area. Paintings were on bark, in sand, done in clay and on rock, such as caves and designated rock surfaces. Each painting told of the particular group's lives. From these paintings our People could read the travels of our spirit creators, the events that shaped the group and where food and water were plentiful. In this sense paintings were a means of reading a message. Dancing has always had the same impact, that is, to convey the messages of an important event. Our traditional storytellers were considered to be educationalists, so the text of their stories not only told of special events, but had very strong moral values attached to them.

By whichever means our Peoples' art is viewed, it cannot be denied that our education and survival was the main role of the artist and by their very nature, they were not merely pieces to decorate the landscape, but more so a written history of creation and education for our future. Since 1788 we have had a different learning system imposed, but the way our artists have survived change, is a story in survival itself. Bearing in mind that all cultures are changing, we have had to contend with rapid changes with the coming of the British. In modern times, the styles of conveying our art may have changed, but the moral values and the educational values have lived on via the text of the artist. Some may argue that our writers, for example, are creating an art form that is alien to Aboriginal Peoples. It must always be remembered that the dot style images that still exist in desert regions are a set of text themselves – they tell a story. Given this, it can be clearly seen that this is as much a written language as any other. The difference is the same as in any language, that is, being able to read the text. So our writers have not really changed the formula, but have taken the language of the oppressor and used it to tell the real history of this country. The same principle can also apply to all other forms of our artwork. Rather than view contemporary Aboriginal Art as an extension of Anglo forms, it should be seen as a celebration of survival of both our ways of education and spiritual and cultural expression.

The environment where the skills of survival are imperative is within the prison system. This is more so for Aboriginal Peoples than any other groups. It has been well documented that our Peoples are over-represented within the prison system. Given the high population being locked up for lengthy periods, once more it can be seen as a celebration when viewing the artwork produced

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by inmates. For it is in this system where oppression is at its greatest. Prisons by their very nature only serve to further remove any individual from their cultural being. The whole regime is one of survival. There is little being done to address our Peoples' cultural needs, and there is our spirituality seen as essential to rehabilitation. Yet time and time again I have witnessed some pieces of art that defy the odds of the environment from which they are produced. Our women and men who are facing a long period of incarceration find themselves not only trapped behind four walls, but cut off from contact of their own mob from which cultural and spiritual learning and expression is an important part of their adult growth.

Many of our Peoples turn to art initially as a means to vent their frustrations at the society that has sat by and watched while the wheels of racism have ground them into the situation they are in. What as a rule starts as a means of mental escape from the day to day routine of imprisonment, usually ends up with the artist exploring their own cultural values via their works. In itself this becomes a means of self-sufficiency, of self-help, of individual rehabilitation, and most importantly, a positive statement of cultural expression. Aboriginal art in prison is no different to our art in any other place; it has always been used to tell of either personal or collective travels through contemporary society. In this manner the traditions of our art are kept very much alive. While the materials used (e.g. paint, canvas or the English language) may differ to the old days, the means of retaining the history of our Peoples are the same. The art produced eventually emerges to the outside world to tell of the tragedy that is called corrective services. These paintings or written works will be passed on as a source of knowledge to the artist's community or even the broader community to serve as a vital knowledge base on life in prison. From a cultural perspective, art in prison has been powerful enough to rise above the oppressive regimes and stand as an example to the rest of the country that our culture will survive and we will adapt to circumstances to continue to teach others our stories. In the remoteness that is imprisonment, this in itself is a remarkable feat. Our prison artists should be applauded for being able to defy the odds and in an important cultural context remain productive. It would serve all of this society to have a long hard think about channelling decent funding into this area. As well as being culturally imperative to the artist, art has the ability to do what law enforcement agencies are failing to do, that is, to rehabilitate. In this area we all stand to gain.

My own experiences within the prison system in three states show this to be a means of discovery of the self, of building self-esteem, hence having a far greater chance of survival in the outside world. This is an area greatly overlooked in handing out custodial sentences – what happens to the person on release. All too often, after a lengthy sentence people are left with little or no support. Having lived in an alien world for a number of years, it becomes very traumatic to deal with the outside world. The functions of art become crucial as a way to make this transition easier. If art were to be heavily promoted within the institution, the artist would then have contact with the art community on the outside. This would have great impact on anyone coming out of prison

as invariably the only contact is with the very people with whom you were locked up. This is not an entirely bad thing, but the problem lies in the fact that it leaves all parties at a higher risk of re-offending. My own writings from a prison cell had a great impact on my own view of myself, not only in terms of finding different mechanisms of expression (rather than that of violence) but the discovery of intelligence. Others have long regarded most people in prison as being of very low intellect. After many years of being told that they are basically stupid by various sections of society, it becomes difficult to break out of being categorised in this way.

Two examples stand out in my mind of success via the arts from institutions that I have had involvement since gaining my own freedom. The first was when I designed a three-month basic education programme for young offenders in Parklea Prison in Sydney. The course had a component of creative writing as a subject. On completion of the course, the prisoners involved wanted to continue with writing as an art form. From this, a small book of poetry was produced – “Inner Dreamings of Parklea”. Of the authors only one person had previously written a poem. The participants were insistent that we print copies of the book, their aim was to send them to their families as a statement of achievement. The late Oodgeroo of the Noonukul read out some of this work at the Aboriginal Writers’ Festival in 1993. To the writers this became the highlight of their lives. All of the participants were doing very long sentences and most continued using art as a means to tell how they felt both culturally and socially. Others saw for the first time in their lives that they were involved with a project that was widely accepted as credible work. Although some did not further their artwork, they enrolled in other courses as they discovered that they were capable of being academically constructive. The second programme was when I ran writing workshops in Minda Juvenile Detention Centre. From this, once more, the participants wanted to have a publication of their works and again to show their loved ones that they were doing something right. While these younger groups achieved the goal of publication, not many furthered their artistic talents. What transpired was every bit as important. Attendance within Minda School is not compulsory. Many young Aboriginal youths were spending their time simply getting up to things that were not productive to adjusting to leading a successful life on the outside. After the workshops and the writings were established, there was an increase of some 60% of Aboriginal youths attending classes regularly.

Currently, there are various art programmes running within Corrective Services in Queensland. After visiting and talking to artists, there is a definite appreciation for materials and facilities. There is an underlying feeling that more could be done to show the outside world their works. This being the case, I would urge all art communities to propose to Corrective Services to facilitate regular exhibitions. This is beneficial in a rehabilitative sense as prison artists have an opportunity to meet the broader art community. Once this is achieved, the options are increased for any individual on release.

The solutions are there for all to see in regard to Aboriginal people being successful in directing their futures through different art forms. It has been

shown that it is culturally relevant in a learning context. It impacts on both the artist and the families involved and more importantly, it is a means of self-analysis and a way of telling the stories. This is the way of our Peoples and it would be remiss of us as a society not to encourage and promote our artists through both financial and moral support. From an Aboriginal perspective, this is the path to our spiritual existence. From a social perspective - we as a society stand to gain. There are the implications of cutting down the crime rate, but also the rare opportunity of learning of our People's path to institutions and their lives in them. Our own People will direct this aspect of our history. By this means, it will be of more value as a knowledge base than the reams of papers and books produced by criminologists trying to analyse a situation of which inherently they have little understanding of the cultural consequences for the group they are studying. Let our People give us the answers, and then we can build from that. Let us not yet again miss out on the opportunity of letting the holders of knowledge pass that on to us. Aboriginal art in prison is not just pretty pictures and flowery words, but a rare and invaluable insight to a world that no academic can ever enter.