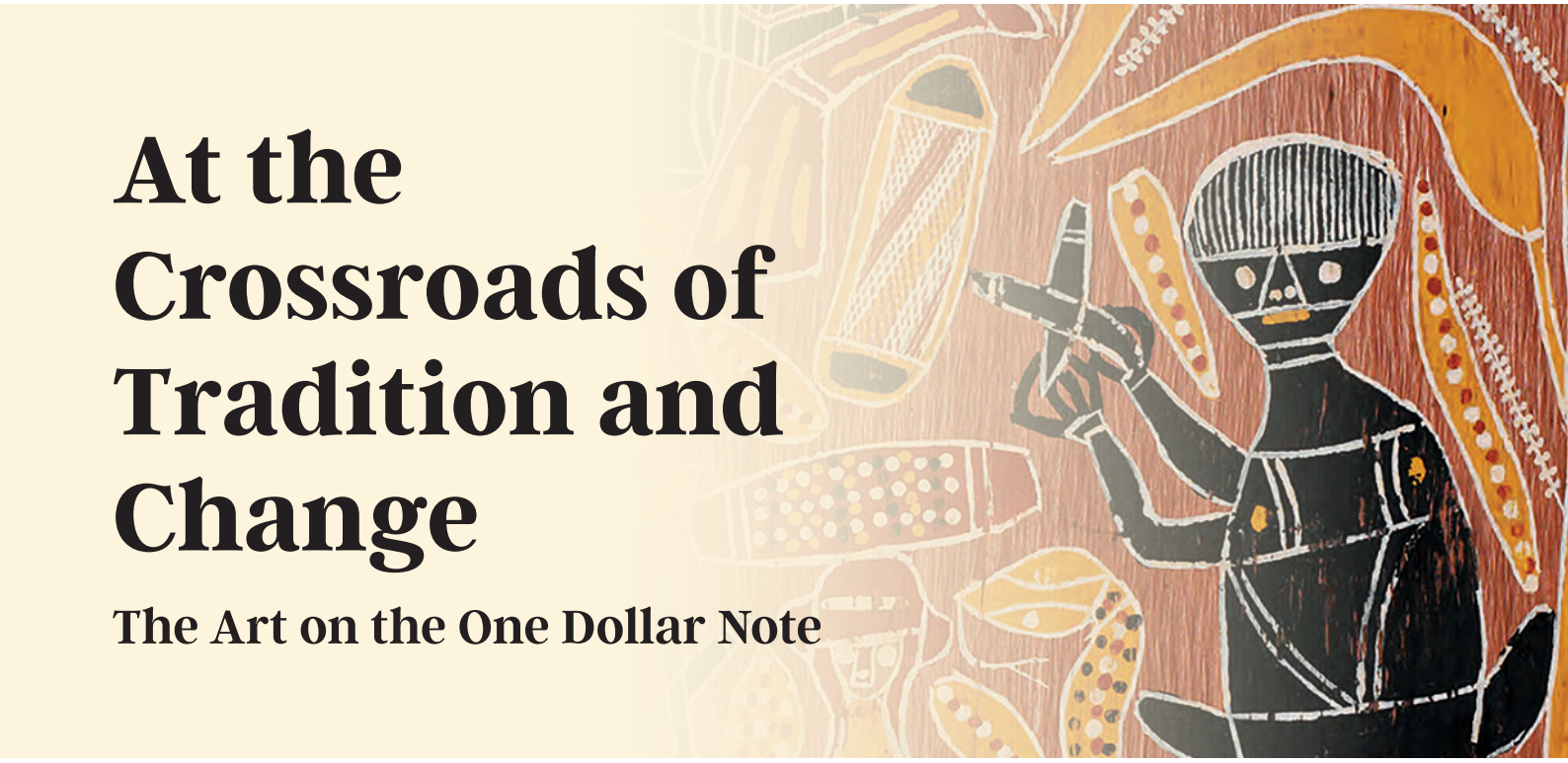
At the Crossroads of Tradition and Change

The Art on the One Dollar Note



BY GREGORY HALE

In 1966, as Australia launched its Indigenous-inspired one dollar note, few paused to question the artworks' origins. The note was meant to honour Aboriginal culture but beneath the surface is a tale of cultural appropriation, lost recognition, and artistic reinvention. It was a pivotal moment in Australian history where Western and Indigenous art collided, exposing deep-seated divisions and sparking a movement that would forever change Aboriginal art.

Aboriginal readers are advised this article contains names and photographs of deceased persons.

An emerging Australian identity in art

For much of the twentieth century, Aboriginal art was viewed as primitive and insignificant in comparison to European art in Australia. Bark paintings, boomerangs, and didgeridoos were popular souvenirs, but the artwork itself was not considered important or worthy of being described as art. Artists of any standing practised and copied techniques of the European masters and were celebrated for this style. Artists such as Norman Lindsay, one of Australia's most prolific and accomplished artists, were revered for their elaborate depictions of Australian life, landscapes and allegorical figures but rarely, if ever, featured depictions of Aboriginal people or their art styles unless in a cartoon or degrading way.

In the early 1930s, artists such as Margaret Preston saw the need to develop an Australian identity in art and began experimenting with Indigenous styles. She was one of the first non-Indigenous Australian artists to use Aboriginal elements in her work. Over the next twenty years, other non-Indigenous artists embraced Aboriginal styles. The painter, Elizabeth Durack, began experimenting with Aboriginal shapes,

◀ *'Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu' by David Daymirringu.*

motifs, and colour palettes to great success, possibly due to authentic Aboriginal artwork not being commercialised and difficult to obtain outside of the Northern Territory. She even took her authentic style one step further and painted some works on bark. Durack was familiar with an Aboriginal view of the world and depicted tribal scenes in her hybrid Indigenous style. Her work in the 1950s and 60s was a unification of two worlds. She purportedly 'channelled' an Aboriginal man to help produce a series of paintings of her later works in an attempt to retain a sense of authenticity. Other artists followed, including James Cant, an Australian painter and art teacher. Cant's work often incorporated Aboriginal elements and spirits in modernist and surrealist works.

English-born Australian artist Russell Drysdale often depicted Aboriginal people in his work, presenting two contrasting themes. In some paintings, he portrayed them in bush settings, sometimes unclothed, reinforcing stereotypes of Aboriginal people as primitive. In other works, however, Drysdale showed Aboriginal figures dressed in Western clothing, complete with cowboy hats. These assimilated depictions reflected the Government's push to integrate Aboriginal people into white society. He also experimented with Aboriginal-inspired styles and earthy, orange and red colour palettes, blending elements of Indigenous art into his modernist work. At a time when granting citizenship to Aboriginal people was tied to notions of assimilation, Drysdale's imagery echoed the Government's aspirations. His deep engagement with Indigenous themes would see him appointed to lead the design team for Australia's new Indigenous-inspired one dollar note.

Religious and European influence

Missions in Australia profited significantly from trading in Aboriginal art, while the artists received only a tiny fraction of the earnings. In some cases, Aboriginal artists were forced to secretly smuggle their paintings out of their Mission homes, risking

Albert Namatjira is featured on the Australia 5 cents stamp from 1968.

punishment to reclaim and sell their work in independent galleries.

Aboriginal people were taught European painting styles at the religious-based Missions. The art teachers instructed them on European techniques and promoted and profited from their work. The Hermannsburg Mission, managed by the German Lutheran Church, held art classes to teach Aboriginal people the European art styles. Their most famous student was Albert Namatjira. Albert, as he was known, was taught watercolour painting by commercial artist Reginald Ernest (Rex) Battarbee.

Before 1967, Aboriginal people were generally not classed as full citizens, and therefore, it wasn't easy to sell their work, and many artists were easy targets to be exploited. On Albert's behalf, Battarbee promoted, sold and profited from Albert's works in his gallery and through galleries across the nation.

Albert's proficiency in the European painting style was seen as evidence that assimilation could work in

Australia. He became the first Aboriginal person to be granted conditional Australian citizenship in 1957.

Another Indigenous artist who was churning out work for a Mission was David Daymirringu*. He would later be known as 'Dollar Dave'.

Over the next few years, Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists continued to blend Western and Indigenous art styles.

Decimal Currency

In 1963, Australia was moving towards decimal currency. A public competition was held to name the new currency. In June, Prime Minister Robert Menzies rejected the public's suggestions, such as *Austral*, *Kanga*, *Dinkum* and *Ming* and declared that the currency would be named the *Royal*. The Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) Note Printing Branch designers hastily began working on new currency designs.

One 1960s modernist design featured a stylised woman, two boomerangs interlocked around her, futuristic buildings, wheat and a cog. Another featured Queen Elizabeth II, and another, Captain James Cook and the *HMS Endeavour*. Some notes also featured Indigenous themes, including line drawings of an emu, a lizard, and a fish, as well as boomerangs and stereotypical representations of Aboriginal men.

Three months later, following a public outcry against the name 'Royal', which was a tribute to the Crown, Harold Holt, the Treasurer, announced that the new currency would now be named the 'Dollar'.

The RBA selected four designers to prepare designs for the new dollar banknotes: Gordon Andrews, Richard Beck, Max Forbes and George Hamori. They were under the guidance of the artist Russell Drysdale. The designers were instructed to include Queen Elizabeth II on the one dollar banknote, and other themes and figures could be introduced in consultation with the Bank.

Images kindly provided by the Reserve Bank of Australia.

Preliminary design concept for the obverse of the one royal banknote featuring a stylised image of a woman, interlocked boomerangs, futuristic buildings, sheaths of wheat and a wheel. Note Printing Branch, Australia 1963.

Preliminary design concept for the obverse of the one royal banknote featuring Queen Elizabeth II and the Commonwealth Coat of Arms. Note Printing Branch, Australia 1963.

Preliminary design concept for the obverse of the one royal banknote featuring Captain James Cook and the HMS Endeavour. Note Printing Branch, Australia 1963.

Preliminary design concept for the obverse of the one royal banknote featuring an Aboriginal man with a boomerang and drawings of rock painting style animals. Note Printing Branch, Australia 1963.

Preliminary design concept for the reverse of the one royal banknote featuring an Aboriginal man and boomerangs. Note Printing Branch, Australia 1963.

One dollar note preliminary design concept. Ink and wash with pencil on paper by Max Forbes, 1964.

Gordon Andrews' preliminary design concept for the obverse of the one dollar note. Original artwork for Queen Elizabeth II by artist and engraver: F. Masino of Giori, Milan.

Gordon Andrews' preliminary design concept for the reverse of the one dollar note. Artist and engraver: F. Masino of Giori, Milan.

Australia's Indigenous-inspired one dollar note 1966.

The pinnacle of this Western-Indigenous movement was in 1966, with the release of the Australian one dollar note. This point in time was the dawn of the most significant shift in Aboriginal art history – the emergence of dot painting and the *Papunya Tula* art movement.

Western-Indigenous style

Gordon Andrews, one of Australia's leading graphic designers, blended Western and Indigenous styles in his graphic work. Known for designing the RBA's logo and, more importantly, Australia's first decimal banknotes.

Andrews played a key role in shaping Australia's visual identity and causing a shift away from the Indigenous, primitive, 'rock painting' style. In 1963, he designed the Australian one dollar note as part of the transition to decimal currency.

His vision was to honour Australia's cultural heritage by incorporating Indigenous-inspired artwork, symbolising the country's historical connection to its original inhabitants and their enduring presence. Andrews built on the emerging Western-Indigenous styles, adding his flair to old rock paintings and incorporating his own hybrid Western-Indigenous artwork.

On 14 February 1966, when the one dollar note was released, Andrews accepted the praise for his artwork and design without acknowledging the artists whose work he had appropriated. Two of the featured images were depictions of ancient rock paintings, and the original artists were unknown. However, one of the artworks was a modern bark painting, and the artist's name *was* known.

Preliminary design of the 'exemplification' of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms.

The final 'exemplification' of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms from the obverse of the one dollar note.

The RBA chose to stay silent. The omission was more than a minor oversight, and their actions failed the 'pub test'. Once the media caught wind of it, the story ignited.

Felt pen drawing of the kangaroo by Gordon Andrews.

The Design of the One Dollar Note

THE OBVERSE

The 'exemplification' of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, as it was described in 1966, is a hybrid style, a Western take on Indigenous artwork. Was Gordon Andrews having a laugh when he presented his parody drawing that somewhat disrespects Australia and the Monarchy?

The Kangaroo

Gordon Andrews' preliminary drawing of the kangaroo showed three fingers with human-like arms, a dragon-like head with horns and a long tongue. He was instructed to make modifications when the concept was approved on 16 April 1964. A local photographer, David Moore, was sent to Taronga Park Zoo to photograph kangaroos as a reference for Andrews' drawings.

The style was changed significantly from a furry-looking kangaroo to an x-ray-like skeleton. Andrews removed the horns, gave it some human pumped-up biceps, changed the eyes and added more toes to the stubby human-like hands. The kangaroo's tail was still unnaturally bent up at the end to fit the space. It is not anatomically correct and is not commonly depicted like this in Aboriginal artworks. Even with additional photo reference, the kangaroo is peculiar and now in a contrasting style to the accompanying emu. One can presume they didn't take a photo of a kangaroo holding a shield for Andrews' reference.

Why is the kangaroo poking his tongue out? This gesture is not a cultural or traditional practice within Australian Aboriginal culture. On reviewing hundreds of depictions of the kangaroo in Aboriginal paintings, there was not one example with its tongue poking out. Kangaroos are often depicted in Aboriginal art and are commonly simplified without fine details. Poking tongues is a common gesture in Māori culture when performing the *Haka*, a traditional war dance intended to intimidate. Did the worldly Gordon Andrews confuse Australian Indigenous cultural practices with those of New Zealand? If not, is the kangaroo merely poking his tongue out at the emu, a larrikin gesture?

The Emu

The preliminary drawing of the emu looks like it's just swallowed a frog. In the final drawing, Andrews extended the legs and, rather than giving it an x-ray appearance like the kangaroo, decided to wrap it in a fur coat. The emu now appears aghast, looking angrily at the kangaroo with an open beak. No examples of an emu with its beak open could be found in hundreds of Aboriginal paintings depicting emus of the period. "The emu in the Coat of Arms has evidently been weather-proofed with a much advertised brand of roofing tile", reported the Canberra Times on 11 January 1966.

Was it Andrews' intention to have a parody of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms?

The Queen

Douglas Glass photographed the Queen for the Australian one dollar note. The designers had particular requirements for the portrait and the Queen was happy to comply. She appears regal in the *Order of the Garter* attire, but her expression shows she is less than impressed by the imagery she appears alongside. The Canberra Times described the portrait, "Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, on the front of the one, looks matronly and disdainful, like a lady offered the wrong cheese at the grocer's".

THE REVERSE

The reverse features a montage of three Aboriginal-inspired works, including illustrations of rock and bark paintings from the Northern Territory. The elements are not related and don't form an overall story. They are merely arranged for visual appeal.

Rock and Cave paintings

The image on the right, of the stick-figure hunters, is a depiction of *Mimih Spirits* seen in cave paintings in western Arnhem Land. Andrews' drawings are somewhat comical in appearance with their open mouths, white eyes, visible breasts and bums. Andrews' art references were illustrations from books, including "Art, Myth and Symbolism" by C.P. Mountford. They are closer in style to paintings by James Cant from the 1950s, which were done soon after the rock paintings were discovered. When comparing Andrews' preliminary drawing, it is clear that he struggled to depict the figures. They were initially without eyes and pac-man-like. The choice of hairstyle is also interesting. The figures look very similar to *Kokopelli*, a well-known spirit from Native American mythology of the Southwestern United States. This style was abandoned in the final drawing. The preliminary drawing was modest, with loincloths covering the private parts and all figures appearing to be male. Modesty was abandoned on the final drawing that clearly shows bare breasts and bums. Was one of the changes requested by the RBA to remove the clothing?

The central images of the kangaroo, goanna, and snake are also inspired by rock paintings from Western Arnhem Land. Andrews drew these from photographs provided to the RBA.

Rock paintings of 'Mimih Spirits', Arnhem Land, Kakadu, Northern Territory, Australia.

Preliminary drawing of 'Mimih Spirits' for the reverse of the one dollar note. Gordon Andrews 1966.

'Mimih Spirits' from the reverse of the one dollar note. Gordon Andrews 1966.

David Daymirringu alongside one of his paintings of 'Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu', 1966.

Bark painting

The main image on the left side of the banknote depicts the oil painting on bark, titled *Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu*, from East Arnhem Land, by David Daymirringu. He was part of the Manyarrngu people and grew up on Milingimbi Island Methodist Mission off the northeast Arnhem Land coast. Daymirringu painted at his Mission home, and the missionaries and art teachers would sell his artwork for their profit.

The central figure of the image is the ancestral hunter *Gurrmirringu* lying in state. He had been hunting and killed a kangaroo, which he was preparing to cook and eat under a tree. One of the roo's cut-off legs can be seen at the top of the image, and the other on the bottom left. He had also gathered some yams and berries, which are depicted by some of the small oval-shaped elements. Gurrmirringu was bitten by *Darrpa*, the poisonous snake seen at his side, and died.

He is surrounded by relatives with clapsticks performing traditional funerary rites.

In Daymirringu's original bark painting, a didgeridoo player accompanied the stick percussionists.

The Czech artist Karel Kupka acquired the original painting of *Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu* in 1963 for the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris, France. Kupka provided photographs of several paintings to A.C. McPherson, Secretary of the RBA, in 1963, which were passed on to Gordon Andrews for art reference. The painting is currently housed in the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, a museum dedicated to the traditional art of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas in Paris, France. At the time, Kupka didn't provide details of the paintings or the artist's name.

Andrews was provided with a black-and-white photo of the painting as a reference for his drawing. In 1965, Andrews' work was incorrectly described as a "faithful line reproduction of an Aboriginal bark painting".

When Andrews drew Daymirringu's painting, he added some elements and removed key elements, notably the seated figure playing the didgeridoo. Did omitting a key element and adding bits and pieces change the meaning or significance of the original work?

Andrews likely had no idea that the artwork was of a funeral scene. The Australian one dollar banknote appears to be the first and only banknote that depicts a funeral. In hindsight, this "funeral" banknote symbolises the death of the Aboriginal primitive rock painting style and the emergence of a short-lived Western-Indigenous art style.

Animal drawings inspired by rock paintings from Western Arnhem Land, from the reverse of the one dollar note. Gordon Andrews 1966.

The evolution of ‘Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu’.

1962

‘Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu’ 1962 by David Daymirringu.

1963

Gordon Andrews’ preliminary drawing of ‘Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu’ 1963.

1963

Gordon Andrews’ final depiction of ‘Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu’ 1963 as seen on the one dollar.

1970

‘Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu’ 1970 by David Daymirringu.

1970s

‘Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu’ 1970s by David Daymirringu.

1983

‘Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu’ 1983 by David Daymirringu.

Andrews' preliminary drawing depicts Gurrmirringu, the central figure with a white face, which is consistent with the original bark painting. Possibly at the request of the RBA, Andrews changed Gurrmirringu's face to black on the final drawing. Gurrmirringu has six toes on his right foot and four fingers on his right hand, as shown in the preliminary drawing, which is consistent with the original painting. Andrews removed a toe in the final drawing but left him with a missing finger. Other figures remained with three, four or five digits. Andrews initialled his drawing, signing 'GA' on the final art.

Gordon Andrews and David Daymirringu.

The aftermath

Leading up to the release of the one dollar note in early February 1966, not all reports were positive. *The Advertiser* newspaper in South Australia praised the new design but was critical of the origin of the Aboriginal artwork. They claimed that one of the artists had not received recognition for his work.

The embarrassing incident rattled the Reserve Bank. Herbert Cole 'Nugget' Coombs, the Governor of the RBA and convenor of the Currency Note Design Group, acted quickly to resolve the issue. They were only advised two weeks before 'C-Day' of the artist's name and Coombs rushed to locate him. In 1966, the Bank paid Daymirringu $1000 through the Department of Welfare in the Northern Territory in recognition of his contribution to the design of the one dollar note. He used the money to purchase a boat with an outboard motor.

The following year, Coombs travelled to the Northern Territory and presented Daymirringu with a silver medallion along with fishing gear and a tackle box.

The painting used as a reference for the one dollar note was not Daymirringu's first or last painting of the same scene. Soon after the note's release on 'C-Day' or 'D-Day' as it was sometimes referred to, on 14 February 1966, Daymirringu began producing many versions of *Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu* that more closely resembled Gordon Andrews' adaptation than his earlier, more varied ceremonial paintings.

Daymirringu gained the nickname 'Dollar Dave' in reference to his artwork appearing on the one dollar note. He embraced the moniker and capitalised on his new-found fame by churning out many copies of the same work. Although Daymirringu was recognised as deeply rooted in cultural storytelling, he was also commercially motivated to provide what the buying art world demanded.

Daymirringu continued to paint the same scene well into the 1980s. From as early as late 1968, Daymirringu's painting had evolved with some key elements that were not in his original painting but can be seen in Gordon Andrews' adaptation, including the omission of the didgeridoo player, the distinct style of the leaves, and the colour of the central figure's face.

With Daymirringu's original painting residing in France, he likely used Andrews' one dollar note as a reference for his subsequent paintings. Daymirringu's copies of *Funerary Rites of Gurrmirringu* were reinvented and most commonly painted without the didgeridoo player at the top, as Gordon Andrews depicted. Another element that changed was the rendering of the leaves. In more than one instance, and more common on the later copies, the two leaves below the figure on the right are shown in both positive and negative: one dark leaf with light veins and one light leaf with dark veins, which is consistent with Andrews' drawing but not seen in Daymirringu's earlier works. Another key element in later works, is the depiction of Gurrmirringu, which is now painted as Andrews depicted him – with a black face. In a peculiar twist, Daymirringu's art evolved to be heavily influenced by Gordon Andrews' depiction of his art.

The artwork on the one dollar note gave rise to the popularity of Aboriginal art in Australia and abroad. Demand increased, and collectors and galleries were looking for the next big thing.

Papunya Tula

In 1971, a pivotal moment in the history of Aboriginal art unfolded with the emergence of the Western Desert painting movement, also known as the *Papunya Tula* movement. At the centre of this shift was Geoffrey Bardon, affectionately nicknamed 'Mr Patterns', an Australian primary school art and craft teacher. Assigned to Papunya, a remote Aboriginal settlement 240 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, Bardon introduced his students to acrylic paint and artistic concepts drawn from Western Modernism, including New York Minimalism, geometric abstraction, patterns, and simplified forms. These ideas influenced his art classes and allowed Indigenous artists to document their culture and storytelling in a permanent medium. During the two years Bardon spent in Papunya, nearly 1,000 paintings were created under his supervision. Bardon established an artists' cooperative at Papunya to sell the artworks.

While Bardon's influence helped shape the movement's early development, the iconic dot painting technique that emerged was a powerful expression of Aboriginal culture reimagined through a new medium. As word spread nationwide, other Aboriginal communities embraced the dot painting technique, allowing the movement to grow and thrive.

The Legacy of the one dollar banknote

The Australian one dollar note is an historical artifact standing at the crossroads of tradition and change. It marks a moment when white Australian artists, such as Gordon Andrews, sought to embrace and reinterpret Aboriginal styles. At the same time, Aboriginal artists remained largely unrecognised, uncredited and often exploited. The banknote's artwork, drawn from sacred cultural stories, filtered through a Western hand, and presented without attribution, sparked a national conversation about cultural ownership and artistic copyright. While the RBA's belated recognition of David Daymirringu was a small step towards justice, the fundamental shift came a few years later.

The rise of the Papunya Tula movement in the 1970s marked a powerful reawakening, an era in which dot painting gave voice to ancestral stories in a new medium, on their own terms. Looking back, the one dollar note did more than mark Australia's move to decimal currency; it exposed deep cultural tensions and, inadvertently, lit the fuse for a cultural and artistic renaissance. ■

It is customary for Aboriginal people to be known only by their tribal name after death.