Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia

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Abstract

From March to November 1948, 17 scientists made up the American-Australian Scientific Expedition (AASEAL) to Aboriginal North Australia. This expedition collected over 50,000 archaeological, ethnographic and natural history specimens from indigenous Australians. By examining a history of colonial collection strategies – especially those informed by modernism – it is possible both to understand the dynamics of AASEAL, from field experiences and encounters, collection strategies and general colonial attitudes towards indigenous Australians, to intercultural encounters.

1 Introduction

Earlier in the previous millennium an alluring question was posed to me in regard to a particular colonial-indigenous encounter that I had been studying for the past year. The question has many possible articulations, but is perhaps best expressed as: how did western collectors of non-western material culture decide on what to collect, from whom, where? What was the mechanism of exchange and hence form of intercultural encounter that took place around these collecting activities? In particular, how could the phenomenon of exploration, politics, collecting and intercultural relations be further understood and nuanced from the field notes and particular artefacts that were collected by the colonial protagonists.

You will not find in this paper an explanation or extensive study of the rock-art which was recorded during this encounter. Instead I focus upon portable art - particularly bark paintings. This particular art form has its origin as a component of Aboriginal people's homes and has been collected in Australia by numerous individuals since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. The bark paintings are in many cultural and practical ways connected to the rock-paintings of Arnhem Land - they are quite literally an extension of it - whereby people chose to empower their homes, whether rock shelters or bark houses, with paintings. Only the prefix ‘rock’ or ‘bark’ is variable and the dominant meanings informing the paintings remain equivalent. These bark paintings offered an opportunity to examine a specific mid-twentieth century Australian colonial encounter and contextualise it within the colonial history of collecting from the non-colonial ‘other’. In particular, I highlight the importance of art in investigations of intercultural relationships.

This paper aims to convey both the essence of an historic encounter and to situate this encounter within an appropriate theoretical framework. It is therefore written as a narrative. I begin by outlining some common, but not always usual, pre-1950s attitudes of non-indigenous researchers and collectors towards ‘other’ cultures. I shall discuss
some common beliefs about human nature circulating in Australia before and during the time of this encounter which impacted upon the collecting of Aboriginal art and, in turn, the relationships between colonial collector/consumer and indigenous producer. The second half of this paper will lead us into the field to look at how colonial beliefs about human nature were transformed from abstract ideas into concrete collections – specifically of Aboriginal art. While it has been argued that individual choice and personal bias are the primary influences on collection formation, the influence of society and culture on the views of these individuals cannot be ignored. In many cases individuals carry out mandates from their institutions or governments. Their methods of collection may reflect these ideas. Finally, I conclude by returning to the fundamental question of this paper to offer some further thoughts regarding the intercultural encounter between a particular brand of non-Aboriginals and indigenous North Australians.

2 The American-Australian Scientific Expedition, AASEAL

The intercultural encounter that has fascinated me is the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Australia (henceforth ‘AASEAL’). This expedition had its genesis on the afternoon of 2 February 1945 when Mr Charles Pearcy Mountford, a self-proclaimed ethnologist and filmmaker, found himself presenting one of his numerous ethnographic films to four thousand enthusiastic members of the National Geographic Society in Constitution Hall, Washington, DC, USA (fig 1). Among the large crowd were members of the National Geographic Society Research Committee. Following the by all accounts successful presentation, they approached the ethnologist and suggested he submit a proposal for a scientific research expedition to Arnhem Land (Lamshed 1972:114-115; Mountford 1975:225; Mountford 1956:ix). Mountford took up this suggestion and his subsequent proposal outlines his intentions for the Arnhem Land, North Australia fieldwork, in particular his desire to record and collect indigenous Australian art: ‘Knowing that the simple art of these people would be the first aspect of their culture to disappear, I have concentrated on the investigation and recording of all phases of their art’ (Mountford, 5 March 1945:2).

Figure 1 The title page of a publicity brochure for Mountford’s 1945 and 1946 lecture tour to the United States of America (Lamshed 1972:120)

Mountford claimed that his previous work was ‘most successful’: ‘Already I have collected with their interpretations about fifteen hundred sheets of their primitive symbolism made entirely by these aborigines. This research has saved the art of the Central Australian from extinction’ (ibid.:2-3).

Mountford’s proposal was accepted and the AASEAL was conducted between March 1948 to November 1948 around Oenpelli, Groote Eylandt, Yirrkala, Milingimbi Island, Winchelsea Island and Chasm Island in North Australia (fig 2; see Elliott 1992; May 2000a; May 2000b; Mountford 1956; Simpson 1951). AASEAL included seventeen non-indigenous researchers from the United States and Australia who came from a variety of scientific disciplines including anthropology, archaeology,
Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia: May

I shall concentrate on the work of three of these researchers: Charles Mountford (ethnologist), Fred McCarthy (anthropologist) and Frank Setzler (archaeologist). From a collecting point of view the results of AASEAL are extensive with over 50,000 objects collected including: 13,500 plants, 30,000 fish, 850 birds, 460 mammals, 2144 ethnological artefacts and 1160 archaeological artefacts. Another 241 pieces of human skeletal material were acquired from rock shelters and archaeological excavations. The ethnographic material comprised 198 spears, 198 armlets, 193 string figures, 132 pieces of worked stone, 99 figurines, 71 paintings on paper and lesser numbers of spearthrowers, paddles, message sticks, dolls, shells, pipes, containers, didgeridoos and belts. The largest component of the ethnographic material was bark paintings - 484 specimens or 22.6 per cent of the ethnographic collection. The AASEAL fieldwork also produced thousands of monochrome and colour photographs, nine kilometres of colour film, and reel upon reel of sound recordings. Three colour films were also produced: *Arnhem Land; Aborigines of the Sea Coast* (also known as *Life on the Sea Coast*); and *Birds and Billabongs* (Mountford 1975:231). In addition to the physical collections, each researcher was supplied with diaries and kept a daily log of events. These diaries are immensely valuable in understanding the day-to-day business of AASEAL as well as helping us to understand the paradigms that informed the individual members’ work.

We get another perspective on these paradigms from a journalist and author by the name of Colin Simpson, who had visited one of Mountford’s expeditions to Arnhem Land and spent a number of weeks with the team members. Simpson published a book entitled ‘Adam in Ochre’ in 1951 where he describes the Australian Aboriginal as: ‘a patient who years ago was marked down as “dying” and whose treatment since has consisted mainly of pillow-smoothing and doses of pity’ (Simpson 1951:186). Simpson’s assertions
regarding the ‘pillow-smoothing’ by non-indigenous Australians may have been influenced by an article published in The Argus in 1906. In this article the Bishop of North Queensland, discussing the work of the Church Missionary Society, is quoted as saying that: ‘any work they could do might be merely smoothing the pillow of a dying race; but that pillow should be smoothed’ (Dewar 1995:9). From this emotional statement and with these words of the impending doom of Aboriginal society in mind, Christian evangelical work developed in Arnhem Land.

These brief sketches of mid-twentieth century western views on human nature assist in demonstrating one of the more common attitudes that existed in Australia—that indigenous Australian society would inevitably cease to exist as a race. This naturally leads us to question where these attitudes originated. The discussion that follows traces the evolution of human thought and discusses how these and other attitudes towards indigenous Australians became firmly ingrained in the Australian psyche. So, before we get to the day-to-day specific of the AASEAL in North Australia, we need to situate it within the dominant modes of thought of the time.

3 The evolution of human thought

The evolution of human thought – at least as it is framed according to western, post-Enlightenment epistemology – has for this study, rather simplistically but also conveniently, been divided into three primary stages of increasing objectivity. The first stage is described as human beings explaining events as the outcome of the arbitrary actions of powerful but capricious gods (Foucault 1970:245; Layton 1997:186). This stage is described as a disordered body of learning in which all things in the world could be linked indiscriminately to humanity’s experiences, traditions or credulities as revealed by Divine
agency (Foucault 1970:51). The second stage is what Foucault (1970:219) described as the ‘Classical metaphysic’ - a stage that resided in the gap between human beings’ perception (or imagination) and the articulation this human perception had with the understanding and will of a single sentient God. Layton (1997:186) describes this as the formulation of metaphysical abstractions with Thomas Aquinas’ idea of universals serving as an example (Blackburn 1994:3,22,23,387). The third and final stage explained the world in terms of scientific truth that was based on a close and true observation of the world external to the self. This Foucauldian ‘Classical order’ distributed across a permanent space the non-quantitative identities and differences that separated and united things and which, in turn, had power over human beings’ discourse (Foucault 1970:218). Descartes most forcefully formulated the idea of a unitary human ego that existed in relation to an external world that the ego perceived by the five senses. These sense perceptions are considered the primary means of knowing the world and the self. Western Europe alone, it was claimed, had achieved the third and advanced stage of human thought (Layton 1997:186). The first and second stages described above play only small roles in the theoretical ideas that inform this paper - those of leading to the influential stages concerning material culture and its uses in establishing and promoting worldviews. The third stage of scientific truth, however, deserves further discussion because of its eventual impact on indigenous populations world-wide.

3.1 Scientific truth (modernism)

The idea of scientific truth and the tradition of objective knowledge created during the Enlightenment overcame a period during which it was believed that acceptance of divinity revealed truth (Foucault 1970:219; Layton 1997:186). A divinely ordained social order was replaced by the idea that the truth of how the world worked could be discovered by scientific investigation. In essence, modernity was concerned with the development of meta-narratives and grand overarching theories through which objective realities and truths could be defined. Examples of the omnipotent power of close, scientific observation include Linnaeus’ scheme of taxonomy and Darwin’s theory of natural selection (Foucault 1970:226; Layton 1997:186). Foucault suggested that for modernism: ‘the critical question concerned the basis for resemblance and the existence of genus’ (1970:162). At the very foundation of this idea rested the belief that objective reality does exist and that people are capable of observing it, recognising it for what it is and are capable of quantifying it. This notion of scientific truth arrived at by objective observation gave power to scientific knowledge and understanding arrived at by the operation of human reason upon the observed world (Layton 1997:186).

3.2 The postmodern condition

Today researchers in many areas of the world regard themselves as no longer working in a modernist world but one that is postmodern. In other words these researchers no longer work in a knowledge environment characterised by the idea of an objective and invariable ‘scientific truth’, though there remain a great many positivist researchers in most disciplines. Postmodernism, as its name suggests, is defined principally in its reaction against modernism. Comte (in Layton 1997:185) has described four trends in this postmodern reaction against modernism, as found commonly in the writings of postmodernists:

- the arrogance of the modernist conceit that the white, European male can detach himself from his culture and can comprehensively and objectively study any aspect of the world
- the error of supposing that any single theory permits knowledge of the world ‘as it really is’
- if meanings are constructed through interaction, there can be no pre-existing Durkheimian ‘collective consciousness’
Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia: May

- there is no 'ivory tower' for the scientist to retreat into because all theories are political and must be judged by their practical effects on people's lives.

Layton (1997:185) and Walsh (1995:131) have attempted to describe the ironic nature of postmodernism by stating that it means different things to different people and that it is characterised by a feeling of placelessness. Johnson (1999:165) argues that researchers' decline of confidence in the Enlightenment, in human perfectibility, or in intrinsic Truth is not so much an intellectual position as the way the world is at the end of the millennium. Pearce (1995:140) described postmodernism as producing a world in which the multiplicity of objects float free in a cultural landscape in which boundaries seem to have dissolved or become highly permeable. It is also evident that the concept of postmodernism is ironic because the word itself is used to dispute the possibility of any grand theory of human behaviour (Layton 1997:185). Layton (1997:186) separates postmodernism into two schools. The first is 'extreme' postmodernism in which the French philosopher Derrida has been situated. Derrida argues that structures of meaning can never be translated in their entirety and are not anchored by reference to the outside world because cultures have constructed autonomous, self-contained worlds of meaning. Foucault has been situated within the second school of 'moderate' postmodernism. Moderate postmodernists often argue that there are communities who share a common ‘discourse’ but that, while each discourse has its own rules, reference can nonetheless be made to structures and entities that exist independently of that discourse but which can affect its form because of the recursive relationship between structure and discourse (Bourdieu 1990; Johnson 1999:165-166; Layton 1997:186). In our relationship with the material world, the philosophical and social uncertainties of the postmodern period have produced a reflexive state of mind in which the old hierarchies of value seem less secure and are perceived as social constructions rather than as explanations of natural truth (Pearce 1995:141).

Thus the ideas that Mountford, Simpson and the Bishop of North Queensland expressed in the early to mid-twentieth century were ensconced within the modernist belief in 'scientific truth'. It would seem timely here to turn the discussion from one of more general epistemological and ontological theories into one specific to collecting as practiced in the western, colonial world. Perhaps an investigation into collecting during this period may assist in further understanding the apparent divide between scientific truth and the idea of inevitable extinction for indigenous Australia.

4 Colonial collecting

Is it an obsession? An addiction? Is it a passion or urge, or perhaps a need to hold, to possess, to accumulate? (Muensterberger 1994:3).

Muensterberger has given a general definition of collecting as: 'the selecting, gathering, and keeping of objects of subjective value' (1994:4). It is important to recognise that people of most cultures have been collecting material culture for thousands of years, if not more, and at each of these stages they have collected for different reasons. Collecting from other cultures is a universal phenomenon not only for colonisers collecting from indigenous groups but also for indigenous groups collecting from colonisers. This study is concerned with the former; yet, it could just as easily be reversed. Vergo observes that: 'whether we like it or not, every acquisition (and indeed disposal), every juxtaposition or arrangement of an object… means placing a certain construction upon history' (1989:2-3). Following this insight, human beings have been using collections to construct history. Elsner and Cardinal (1994:2) have shown that: 'the history of collecting is… the narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited' and that: 'social order is itself inherently collective: it thrives on classification, on rule, on labels, sets and systems' (ibid). In this way,
collecting extends to empires collecting countries and populations, early modern European secular authorities collecting slaves, churches collecting souls and archaeologists collecting artefacts and knowledge. Alexander is of the opinion that: ‘of all the human traits that distinguish man [sic] from other animals, certainly the presence of cultural memory stands out’ (1988:7). By this he means not just the creation of tools but greater inventiveness leading to forms of decoration, to art and ultimately the idea of imagination. Alexander writes of human beings having the power to imagine things other than as they appear, to create stories, to develop religious beliefs, erect monuments, to record history and to be continually interested in the past: ‘these are marks of man’s [sic] self-awareness and self-interest’ (Alexander 1988:7). From this interest in the past in general terms comes an interest in collecting to preserve and control the past. It has been argued that sacred or magical values were attributed to ancient cultural remains and that this was followed by an interest in human relics for their own sake. Thus, there develops a secondary interest in recording and discovering human inheritance (Alexander 1988:8).

The question here lies in how modernism or ‘scientific truth’ manifested itself by way of the activity of collecting. Ironically, despite striving for ‘the truth’ modernism allowed contradictory theories of human nature to exist. For example, Darwin’s Theory of Natural Selection and the idea of unilinear progress known as the ‘Great Chain of Being’ (Pearce 1995:123) are formally contradictory; yet they came to be seen as synonymous and in the context of imperialism they are known as Social Darwinism (Griffiths 1996:10). As a consequence of changing social theories, changes were occurring in collection practices and, ultimately, museum practice. By the mid-nineteenth century, collections of curiosities were giving way to the modernist scientific museum study based on rigid classificatory principles. People collected and arranged their artefacts to support social theories with tangible ‘scientific evidence’ (Foucault 1970:162; Griffiths 1996:10; Pearce 1995:123). Consequently, alongside the classification of human beings was a corresponding classification of their material culture - including art. Evolutionary theory had prompted new ethnological displays and the most influential British curator was Lieutenant-General Pitt-Rivers (Hudson 1987:31).

Pitt Rivers...collection drive was linked with an overarching philosophy of man [sic] and material culture in which Darwinian ideas, applied to objects, yielded a scheme whereby artefact types developed one from another according to a process of natural selection (Pearce 1992:8).

Importantly, Pitt-Rivers believed that historical sequences could be reconstructed using actual objects to show different cultural levels achieved by different human groups and to illustrate notions of progress (Pearce 1992:8). He was a Darwinist untroubled by a direct correlation between the evolution of species by natural selection and the material progress of human society. He often compared the prehistorian to the palaeontologist and extinct fauna to primitive humans (Hudson 1987:31). Meanwhile, archaeologists and anthropologists were beginning to accumulate large museum collections backed by interpretive ideas about typology deriving from Pitt-Rivers’ classificatory schema, eighteenth-century biology and later Childe’s ideas on the relationship between material evidence and human cultures (Pearce 1992:8).

During this period the artefact became a piece of primary evidence in a western view of natural and cultural development and was therefore placed upon an ascending (and descending) evolutionary ladder – as were human beings (Clifford 1988:228; Griffiths 1996:22; Pearce 1995:139). It is also relevant that the dominant producers of knowledge – Victorian Europe - had a formal belief in the ‘Great Chain of Being’ that asserted Victorian Europe’s physical and intellectual superiority (Lovejoy 1964). Such superiority was Eurocentric and measured by the presence and absence of certain types of objects such as the wheel, monumental architecture, writing and so forth. This science of
Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia: May

classification is, in Gould’s words: ‘a mirror of our thoughts, it changes through time and is the best guide to the history of human perceptions’ (Elsner and Cardinal 1994:2). Thus, if classification is the mirror of collective humanity’s thoughts and perceptions, then collecting is its material embodiment. It is within these ideas that the political rationality of modernist collecting emerges (Bennett 1995:89). Foucault argued that the emergence of new technologies aimed at regulating the conduct of individuals and populations are characterised by their own specific rationalities and generate their own specific fields of political problems and relations (Bennett 1995:90). Social Darwinism, one of the meta-narratives developed in the modernist climate, indirectly led to classification and, in turn, to oppression of cultures revealing the political nature of these modernist social theories (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999:25).

4.1 Colonial collecting in Australia

It would seem appropriate here to redirect the discussion from one of more general theories of collecting to specifically those theories affecting the collection of indigenous Australian material culture. Nietzsche (1974:24) once described the common view of Australia in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as one of a ‘palaeontological penal colony’ because the western world viewed the continent as a museum where the past could still be seen in a natural state. The scientific world at this time assumed that there was a universal model of human society and human nature. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999:86) has argued that many indigenous cultures were seen as occupying one of several, more primitive stages, through which humanity had passed before reaching its apogee in the form of Victorian Europe. This was the case in Australia where indigenous cultures were thought to show the scientific world one of the most basal and simple systems of social organisation. Indigenous cultures were placed on the lowest rung of this evolutionary ladder as evidence of biological and cultural relics in the process of ‘slipping into extinction’ (Griffiths 1996:10). Darwin commented in his publication Descent of Man that: ‘at some future period not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man [sic] will almost certainly exterminate, replace the savage races throughout the world’ (1871:521). With most human beings occupying one or other rung on this ‘Great Chain of Being’, those on the uppermost rungs felt they could look down and view the ‘others’ in authoritative contemplation. When desiring information on the history of these ‘others’ they felt justified in reaching down and taking artefacts, placing them on their mantelpieces for pleasure. Some even took to analysing these souvenirs, eventually labeling themselves ‘archaeologist’.

Collecting artefacts from other cultures for the purposes of display and study was seen in the nineteenth century as a refined and educated form of hunting. Naturalists and antiquarians were inspired by the thrill of the chase whether they were chasing artefacts ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’ (Griffiths 1996:19-20). Griffiths argues that: ‘the popularisation of natural history in this period was inseparable from frontier experience, imitations of war, hunting prowess, evolutionary morals, social status and “manly pursuits”. Natural history became an outdoor school of character formation’ (1996:21). Pearce would seem to agree stating that natural history collecting: ‘afforded an intellectual outlet for the middle class... and gave collectors the feeling of being at the cutting edge of their time’ (1995:126). By the mid-nineteenth century, collections were rarely being formed without debate. Pearce charts this process from roughly the eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century and isolates two common aspects of collecting. The first such aspect concentrated upon art and natural history and manifested itself in important museums to which the general public was allowed. The second aspect concentrated upon historical and exotic material with its exhibition being commercially organised. Between these two aspects the major private collectors lurked, often with a foot in both aspects of collecting (Pearce 1995:124). The most common view held by Europeans at this time was that they were continually changing and evolving and could thus
be analysed through ‘history’ whereas their non-European objects of study - the ‘primitive people’, were timeless and were therefore subjected to a different form of analysis – ‘Anthropology’ (Griffiths 1996:24-25; Clifford 1988:220-221). In other words, those cultures occupying the top rungs of the evolutionary ladder were believed to be continually moving upwards towards an ever more advanced and enlightened state whereas those occupying the lower rungs were perceived to be static or degenerate. This schema also applied to the material cultures or artefacts of each culture. Most colonial collectors and observers such as Mountford and the Bishop of North Queensland also saw the cultures from which they were collecting as ‘endangered’.

In December 1949, Charles Mountford published an article entitled Exploring Stone Age Arnhem Land in the National Geographic Magazine. This title was informed by and part of the westerners’ pessimistic views of the future of indigenous cultures and reveals the continuation of Social Darwinian views at least into the 1950s in Australia (Mountford 1949:745-782). Terms such as ‘Stone Age’, ‘prehistoric’ and ‘primitive’ proved to be powerful metaphors for the ‘uncivilised’ indigene and conveyed to the world an image of a static and moribund culture: “Calmly, slowly, the aborigines returned to their halcyon life in Arnhem Land where haste had no place, where time never mattered, where tribal folk didn’t reckon in days or years or even centuries’ (Mountford 1949:782).

4.2 AASEAL collecting of Aboriginal art in Australia

It is now important to discuss the processes involved in the initial shaping of the AASEAL Aboriginal art collection. The individuality of the collectors will also be explored to assist in determining the extent of influence for social biases. Some Australian researchers collected contemporary ethnographic material culture - including bark paintings – believing that these cultures (or culture, as many believed at the time) represented an earlier form of human development. Until approximately the 1950s, researchers of Australian indigenous cultures generally collected material culture with the underlying assumption that their study group was an unchanging people with unchanging material culture (Trigger 1995:141). Murdoch summed up this way of operating in 1917 in the extreme view that: ‘the dark-skinned wandering tribes… have nothing that can be called a history…change and progress are the stuff of which history is made: these blacks knew no change and made no progress, as far as we can tell’ (Attwood and Arnold 1992:x). This meant that ethnographic collections were formed and studied from what were assumed to be static and prehistoric cultures. Researchers saw this ethnographic material as a surrogate that provided them with the data absent from the archaeological record. In other words, it was believed that the gap resulting from perishable material culture not surviving in the archaeological record could unproblematically be filled with modern indigenous ethnographic material (McBryde 1978). In this way, bark paintings were considered capable of providing rock-art researchers with otherwise absent data. Though the perception of Australian indigenous culture as static prior to European colonisation was called in to question by researchers such as Tindale working in Southern Australia, interest in cultural change and regional variation did not mark Australian archaeology until the late 1940s. This interest followed the advent of radio-carbon dating – a technique that showed in an idiom authoritative to western researchers that the unvarying indigenous cultures were, in fact, a lot more varied than had previously assumed (Renfrew & Bahn 1996:132; Trigger 1995:143).

With colonisation and the destructive impact that this had upon indigenous cultures worldwide, people began to see Darwin’s prediction of the ‘civilised races’ replacing the ‘savage races’ fulfilled (Darwin 1871:521). Though at first the devastation of indigenous cultures was accepted as progress, eventually fear of losing something irreplaceable such as the indigenous view of the past and, more cynically, of losing access to potential resources and markets, began to enter the minds of the colonisers. This fear led to an urgency in recording
and preserving all indigenous material culture in Australia during the early to mid-twentieth century (Clifford 1988:231; Griffiths 1996:26; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999:61). There was a compelling need to collect and record material culture before the people that produced them disappeared entirely or before they changed or were ‘contaminated’ by the influence of colonising cultures. Many researchers and collectors in Australia, including Mountford, considered their work as salvage (Clifford 1988:218,220,231,234,236; Elkin 1964:362; Griffiths 1996:25). Evidence of Mountford’s anxiousness to collect and record can be found primarily in his funding applications during the 1930s and 1940s including his 1945 application to the National Geographic Society for the AASEAL. He speaks of his fear of the disappearance or change of aspects of indigenous culture caused by European colonisation — especially the art, which: ‘is disappearing rapidly, thus the urgency to gather all details of the drawings, their significance and their relationship to the legendary stories’ (Mountford 5 March 1945:3). And again: ‘Arnhem Land is an aboriginal reserve, and before the war, except for a few missions along the coast, was uninhabited by Europeans. The native culture was not, at that time, influenced by white civilisation; it is unlikely that the present military occupation has changed them’ (ibid).

Contrary to Mountford’s generalised belief, Clarke has pointed out that: ‘in reality, by 1948 Arnhem Land had become far less isolated, due to the large numbers of soldiers and airmen stationed there during World War II and through the establishment, since the early 1900s, of missions located around the coastline’ (1998:13). Dewar has also emphasised contact in the 1920s AD with Japanese and Macassan trepanging crews who would frequently barter alcohol, tobacco, steel and other commodities for the sexual services of the Yolngu women (1995:22). During the AASEAL the anthropologist Fred McCarthy expressed concern at the situation in which he found himself: ‘I went to bed at 9 pm but, though tired out, couldn’t sleep because of our situation. Here we are, 16 of us, backed by the U.S. and Australian funds, but the natives are almost completely civilised, speaking English well and have dropped their ceremonial, hunting life’ (McCarthy 14 April 1948). He was also concerned about Mountford’s choice of base camps and his inability to work with nomadic aborigines living in their ‘normal’ environment but, in response, he saw the opportunity for studying culture-contact: ‘The choice of such centres as base camps, instead of localities where aborigines were living entirely by their individual efforts off the land, meant that valuable opportunities were lost to study their so-called primitive culture, and to collect the products of their handicrafts in actual use’ (McCarthy nd a:2).

Even before reaching Arnhem Land, archaeologist Frank Setzler suspected similar problems to those of McCarthy, fearing the indigenous cultures had already been ‘polluted’ by the west and were therefore of no use to the researchers. He commented in a letter to Mountford: ‘In a recent article in Oceania I noticed that the natives around Army camps had taken to card playing. These natives may be so Europeanised that we would not be using them’ (Setzler 31 September 1947:1). With this background, it is hoped that the following information regarding the act of collecting by the researchers on AASEAL will be seen not only in the practical sense that it was applied, but also in a wider sense of society, imperialism, Social Darwinism, and human nature.

4.3 Individual AASEAL collection strategies

It is a little surprising to find that no stated collection policy concerning ethnographic material culture was established before the AASEAL members left for Arnhem Land. Essentially, any decisions on what to collect were the domain of individual members of the expedition, especially Charles Mountford, Frederick McCarthy and Frank Setzler. These three individuals were working out of the South Australian Museum, the Australian Museum and the Smithsonian Institution respectively. Before beginning their expedition to Arnhem Land, very little correspondence was entered into between any of
the participating institutions regarding the collection of ethnographic artefacts. One generalised exception is from Mountford: ‘I did not mention anything about collections, because it might complicate matters, but you can take my personal assurance as leader that your museum will receive a representative series of all ethnological material collected’ (Mountford 31 December 1947: 1).

Elliott (1992) stated that this lack of correspondence is due to Mountford’s avoidance of the issue, yet, although he certainly did not encourage discussion, no evidence that he thwarted discussion has been located during my research. Perhaps this is because Mountford had ties to both the South Australian Museum and the Australian Government, which complicated the collection process for him. Mountford’s vague promises to the authorities that the material collected would be distributed properly among the primary sponsoring institutions of the AASEAL obfuscated what material, exactly, would be collected. Thus the primary and official collectors went into the field with their own ideas on what their institutions needed and what they would try to collect.

4.3.1 Charles Mountford

Mountford, on the other hand, appears to have had a good knowledge of what he was going to collect in Arnhem Land. He had previously visited the Roper River area in the early 1940s and collected material culture, particularly bark paintings (Lamshed 1972:107-108). McCarthy wrote in his diary on one of the first days at Umbakumba that: ‘Monty wants to do art and legends, and to get a collection’ (McCarthy 18 March 1948). Many months later McCarthy realised that this was not the aim entire of Mountford, which he now saw as: ‘He [Mountford] is not really concerned whether we get a collection or not so long as he gets a private collection of bark paintings which, I believe, he wants for the purpose of exhibitions and lectures in the United States’ (McCarthy 8 August 1948). The reasons Mountford wanted to collect ethnographic material for his own use require further discussion and may also illustrate the role personalities played in collection strategies. Though Mountford clearly stated that he: ‘would desire that the ethnological material [including bark paintings] collected on this Expedition be lodged in the South Australian Museum, where it will be available for study’ (Mountford 5 March 1945:6). But despite this proclamation to the National Geographic Society, in the field his intentions became clearer. Mountford did, it seems, intend for a large part of the ethnographic material collected to go to the South Australian Museum, but McCarthy believed that he intended to sell it to them. The destination of the money realised from the proposed purchase is unknown (McCarthy 18 March 1948).

We had a talk about the ethno. [ethnographic] coll. [collection] Monty wants it split into three batches for Adelaide, Sydney and Washington, but this means that Australia gets 2/3 and the U.S. 1/3, Adelaide buys from Mountford his third altbo [although] it contributes no funds or salary to the expedition, and there is some doubt about where the money Mountford receives goes (McCarthy 18 March 1948).

Though it would appear that Mountford’s intention was always to collect ethnographic material, particularly bark paintings, his intentions for this material were not what his contemporaries such as McCarthy considered an appropriate collection strategy. The notion of selling a collection influences deeply decisions about what to collect and what not to collect. For example, bark paintings would most certainly sell for larger amounts of money than other, less aesthetically pleasing ethnographic material. Elliott lends credence to this notion by showing that Mountford was also more willing to trade tobacco or money for bark paintings, carvings, painted paddles, bark coffins, spears and ceremonial objects that he was for other, less visually spectacular objects (1992:10). It was not only Mountford’s eye for the main chance that influenced his collection strategy, but also his conception of Aboriginal ‘art’. He believed that artistic expression could be studied independently of social organisation, a view scorned by his
colonies and he once lamented that:

It was the scientist rather than the painter who studied ‘primitive art’ and therefore approached the subject intellectually rather than emotionally... The designs are analysed, compared, their sequences ascertained, and their ages estimated. But in such painstaking investigations one finds little appreciation of beauty, of balance in colour and form, or of appeal to the senses (Mountford 1950: Introduction).

Studying artistic expression independently of social organisation meant that Mountford entered the field, collected art and felt entirely justified in ignoring the social structures surrounding it. In other words, he could spend his nine months collecting, and commence research only on return to Adelaide. Mountford collected bark paintings as ‘art’ rather than ‘artefact’ at a time when indigenous art was seen to reside more correctly within the precinct of orthodox Anthropology (Neale 1998:210). The collection strategy employed by Mountford at Groote Eylandt, Yirrkala and Oenpelli was to establish a tent nicknamed the ‘shop’ for the indigenous people to bring goods they wanted to trade:

All of the bark paintings were taken to Mountford’s sort of shop. It was a big tent and the people took their bark paintings and things to him and he talked about them and paid them whatever he [pause] I don’t know what he paid them. But he also got interpretations of them from the people (Elliott 1992:88).

McCarthy’s diaries state that between 10/- [shillings] to £1 [pound] was paid for each bark painting, 4/- to 10/- for spears, 5/- to 10/- for baskets, 10/- to 15/- for mats and painted skulls cost £1 each (fig 4 and 5; McCarthy 8 August 1948). While collecting bark paintings Mountford often commissioned particular works. He notes in the expedition records that: ‘the bark paintings in the expedition collection, and, in fact, most of those housed in the various universities and museums, have never been part of a wet-weather shelter, but have been made at the request of the investigator’ (Mountford 1956:8). Not only did Mountford request the indigenous artists to produce bark paintings but on many occasions it is recorded that he suggested topics for the artists to paint. For example, the first painting Mountford collected was commissioned thus: ‘I suggested that he [Minimini] makes the first drawing that of the south-east wind mamarika (mamari:k)’ (Mountford nd a:176). In May 1948 he recorded that: ‘today, I asked for bark drawings dealing with astronomy, spirit children and gurumuka, the spirit of the dead. They were certainly tough subjects, but brought some interesting results’ (Mountford nd b:274). Other examples of commissioned works include Nanawanda being asked to draw the spirit children and after two days producing a bark painting depicting a man, his wife and family. Mountford patronisingly described this as: ‘a most decorative sheet, but of little value for a greater knowledge of the origin of the spirit children’ (Mountford nd b:274). One apparent contradiction that emerges in Mountford’s later writing is where he says that his method ‘was to ask the men to make bark paintings for me, seldom suggesting a subject’ (Mountford 1956:13); gainsaying his diary entries of eight years prior.

Figure 4 Painting on paper “The Man, Nimbawah” from Oenpelli by an unknown artist [P21.1956] (Mountford 1956: 222, pl 65B).
To assist in collection and filming, Mountford negotiated to have ceremonies, including the Arawaltja ceremony, held near to the AASEAL base camp. He negotiated this by offering food to the participants, which had the additional benefit of pleasing the missionaries who usually objected to people leaving for the ceremonies (Mountford nd c:387). Previously, Mountford had learnt that dispensing rations aided one’s collection strategy immeasurably. In 1940, for example, at the Granites in the Tanami Desert he ‘again had charge of feeding the Aborigines… the chore gave him a chance to win over the women with tidbits, so that they were persuaded to discard their filthy western garments… when he wanted them to pose for standard photographs’ (Lamshed 1972:53). During the same year, Mountford berated a group of indigenous men and women for walking across the area he was filming wearing western clothes (Lamshed 1972:107). During the AASEAL’s eight-week stay at Yirrkala, Mountford, with the assistance of McCarthy and Setzler, continued to collect bark paintings but also concentrated on carved animals and human figures (Mountford 1956:111). Once the supply of bark for painting was exhausted at Yirrkala and Oenpelli, Mountford (1956:13) supplied the artists with sheets of rough-surfaced dark grey and green paper.

4.3.2 Fred McCarthy and Frank Setzler

McCarthy came to Arnhem Land with the aim of filling gaps in the few existing collections of indigenous Australian material culture held by the Australian Museum, as well as to collect and document those objects that the AASEAL members observed were being made or used by Aboriginal people (Jones 1987:12). Despite his intentions to fill gaps in the collections at the Australian Museum, he soon came to realise the many restricting factors on his work that were obvious in the field. For example, he saw the presence of three anthropologists/archaeologists/ethnologists on the expedition as limiting each other’s scope even though it added to the overall data (McCarthy nd b:1). To resolve this difficulty he chose to specialise and selected those aspects of research and collecting that offered the most productive results in the comparatively limited time spent in each of the three base camps: ‘we have only a small time in each camp… and we have got to specialise to succeed’ (McCarthy 18 March 1948). His collection of approximately 193 string figures from Yirrkala is an example of this specialised collection strategy. Mountford’s promises before and during the expedition of a clean split of the ethnographic material meant that the Australian Museum would receive artefacts collected by other researchers as well as McCarthy and, consequently, he had no reason to fear having only a limited representation of what he collected.

Setzler had less of an understanding of the indigenous cultures of Arnhem Land and, consequently, came to Aboriginal communities not knowing the situation in which he would find himself:

Never having been in ‘the land down under’ I am indeed looking forward to this opportunity. My colleagues here in the museum are also
Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia: May

anxious to start work in this relatively unknown section of Australia. As an anthropologist I have kept posted in a general way with the various Australian reports on the aborigines (Setzler 1 September 1947:1).

In a letter written more than a year after he voiced his initial concerns Setzler lamented that, “we [the Smithsonian Institution] have never had a truly representative series of Australian anthropological specimens” (21 December 1948:1). As his institution’s collection of indigenous Australian material was limited before he travelled, his understanding of the material culture of Arnhem Land may also have been limited. McCarthy’s statement following the expedition would seem to support this fact when he also states that: ‘Arnhem Land was selected because the museums of Australia and America possess few specimens from this remote region’ (McCarthy 16 January 1949). It appears that Setzler had very little idea of what material to collect in Arnhem Land before his arrival, whereas McCarthy knew the material culture being used by the indigenous people in Arnhem Land and, hence, had a general idea of the material with which the AASEAL would return. Perhaps aware of their imperfect knowledge of what to collect, McCarthy and Setzler collaborated to collect ethnographic artefacts on Milingimbi Island. After they had finished their archaeological work for the day, the two men’s tents became a ‘shop’ much in the manner Mountford set up his tent-shop, and indigenous men and women were able to bring in their materials for trade. It is not recorded whether, like Mountford, they paid cash for the material. Rather, it appears that they traded tobacco, razor blades, combs and mirrors to obtain 191 ethnological specimens including 23 bark paintings and three paintings on paper. McCarthy and Setzler were popular and Aboriginal people came from more distant places such as Cape Stewart on the mainland to trade their goods (Setzler 28 August 1948:2). McCarthy (nd a:8) recorded that the people were eager to trade and this is reflected in the number of artefacts they were able to obtain over a three-week period:

After our excavations…we would return to our abode to find several Milingimbi natives and sometimes those from the mainland, such as Cape Stewart, waiting to barter their implements, baskets, even their highly prized ceremonial objects, for that dark brown stick of tobacco. As the allotted period of three weeks came to a close our house looked like a museum store room (Setzler nd:6).

4.3.3 Outside help

At Milingimbi, Reverend Hannah and later Reverend Ellemor assisted the AASEAL researchers. Reverend Ellemor assisted by obtaining what McCarthy and Setzler did not have time to collect or record such as interpretations of designs and carved pipes for the pair (Ellemor 21 June 1949:1). While McCarthy and Setzler were visiting Milingimbi, Mountford arranged for Reverend Ellemor to collect a number of bark paintings for his collection (Mountford 1956:267). This was an interesting arrangement considering men from his expedition were already on the island collecting. It may reflect that the individuals were collecting, at that stage, for their own institutions and that there was competition for bark paintings (fig 6).

On Groote Eylandt, Fred Gray assisted members of AASEAL. Gray worked as a trepang fisherman around the coast of Arnhem Land before establishing a ‘native settlement’ at Umbakumba. He originally wanted the Christian Missionary Society, who had a lease on the area, to oversee interaction between the men from the Flying Boat Base and the local people. His opinion was that: ‘there is definite contact between the aboriginals [sic] and the men from the Base and the position…in my opinion is unsatisfactory’ (Dewar 1995:82). When the church announced they could not afford to staff the area for two years, Gray considered this inadequate and decided to intervene personally, applying for permission to take up residence. With the support of the Christian Missionary Society and the Flying Boat Base, Gray established Umbakumba. Though run along lines similar to a Christian mission, Gray was criticised for exploiting the indigenous people who
Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia: May

had no concept of money and were paid in kind with food, tobacco and cloth (Dewar 1995:82-84; Rose 1968:135). The joining of the AASEAL with Gray’s settlement proved to be practical as payment scales for artefacts and for work were already set (Elliott 1992:88).

5 Discussion

It is important to understand why the AASEAL men and women desired to collect the material culture of another culture. There are two separate issues that need to be dealt with here. The first is the motivation of the institutional sponsors that sent their staff. The second is the role of the individual collectors:

Museum objects are created by the act of collecting, usually twice over - firstly through the choices of the individual collector, and secondly, by the willingness of a museum to take the collected assemblage for reasons which have to do with its perceived aesthetic, historic or scientific value. (Pearce 1992:7)

The two museums - the Australian Museum and the Smithsonian Institution - that sent their anthropological and archaeological staff to join AASEAL did so because they wanted a more extensive collection of indigenous Australian material culture. The expedition also offered the rare opportunity of in-the-field training for their staff. In addition, the Smithsonian Institution was keen to improve relations between Australian and American scientists. For both institutions there was also the appeal of gaining a collection of Aboriginal art and this deserves some further discussion. Stemming from the ideas of Social Darwinism there was a sense of urgency to record the ‘dying races’ and to ‘save’ the tangible evidence of these indigenous cultures. ‘Anthropology in Australia was driven by the expectation of Aboriginal extinction and by the urgency of preserving the records of a dying race’ (Griffiths 1996:26). Even though some institutions and their researchers may not have believed totally that indigenous Australians were ‘a dying race’, all appear to have believed that these cultures were in decline due to western influence. It is certainly possible, therefore, that these

Figure 6 Bark painting ‘Hawksbill Turtles’ attributed to ‘Nangapiana’ from Groote Eylandt, held in the © Australian Museum (E53108) and reproduced with their permission
Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia: May

institutions desired to gain better, larger and more representative collection of art from Arnhem Land because they feared the opportunity to collect would soon be gone forever. Complications in using the urgency argument arise when the influence of individual collectors is discussed. It is understood that both McCarthy and Setzler were upset at the changes stemming from contact with colonising cultures that they saw in indigenous culture. Setzler saw this as disappointing and unfortunate in terms of research, while McCarthy expressed a little disappointment but also excitement at the possibility of studying culture-contact. Mountford’s disappointment in the non-traditional lifestyle of his ‘study group’ was less obvious than the other researchers. These three quite different responses – disappointment – excitement at a new possibility – and indifference amply illustrate Muensterberger’s point that:

It is, of course, a given that whatever is collected is particularly significant to the individual collector. Obviously, his [sic] collection is bound to reflect certain aspects of his own personality, his taste, his sophistication or naiveté; his independence of choice or his reliance on the judgment of others. (1994:4)

There is little doubt that Mountford desired a large collection of ethnographic material to assist in his personal research ventures (including displays of bark paintings on lecture tours). It is also likely that he intended to sell and trade collected artefacts. Certainly, these ideas can be connected to the idea of preserving the records of a ‘dying race’, but they also reflected his personal and financial ambitions. Pearce’s observations on ‘Acquiring the collection’ are here apt:

The process of selection lies at the heart of collecting, and as we shall see, the act of collecting is not simple; it involves both a view of inherited social ideas of the value which should (or should not) be attached to a particular object and which derive from the modern narratives... and impulses which lie at the deepest level of individual personality (Pearce 1992:7).

Misunderstanding how an artefact was collected can have a huge effect on any conclusions reached regarding the material collected. To use the example of a painting it would seem essential to know whether this piece of art existed before the collector arrived or whether it was commissioned on arrival. More importantly for this study, understanding exactly what events were taking place to acquire the art pieces can tell us a great deal about the relationships which were formed in the field between the western researchers and the indigenous cultures. The collection strategies employed by the AASEAL members tended to be determined primarily by the individual collector and once determined were employed at each Aboriginal location in very similar ways. Mountford’s collection of bark paintings usually involved a discussion with the artist concerning the subject of the artwork, two days for the artist to complete his (there are no records suggesting women painted for Mountford) work, another discussion between collector and artist regarding an interpretation of the design. Mountford paid approximately 10/- to £1 depending on the standard and size of the work. There is no evidence that McCarthy and Setzler had any dealings with the artist before the purchasing of the art works.

6. Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper I stated that I was curious to further understand AASEAL and their interactions with many indigenous communities during 1948. More specifically, I wanted to know what could be further elucidated from a study of the reasons for and methods of collecting portable Aboriginal art during AASEAL. It was for this reason that much of this paper has been concerned with the phenomenon of collecting, which seems to be:

... the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will
to enclose in one place at all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organising in this a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. (Foucault 1986:26)

Modernism manifested itself in the form and manner of the AASEAL collecting practices and, in turn, introduced Social Darwinism as the primary overarching theoretical framework for the 1948 expedition. This meant people collected and arranged their material to support these theories with ‘scientific evidence’. The influence of Social Darwinism and the ‘evolutionary ladder’, placed indigenous Australians on rungs lower than the western cultures and meant that even in 1948 the AASEAL researchers came to Arnhem Land with certain beliefs about their cultural superiority affecting their work (Griffiths 1996:10). The belief that the cultures they were studying were soon to be lost imbued the collection of material culture with a sense of urgency and moral priggishness and, in turn, determined the collector/manufacturer relationships that formed in the field in 1948.

Though the ideas associated with Social Darwinism such as Aboriginal Australia’s so-called static cultures and history had come into question through numerous investigations such as Tindale’s archaeological work in southern Australia, the 1948 AASEAL was irrevocably modernist. Some of the most practical evidence of this modernist position is evident in the disappointment felt by members of AASEAL on discovering their ‘stone-age men’ wearing jeans, playing cards and using American slang. There is no doubt that individual character and preference influenced interactions towards forming a collection of material culture. It would be naïve, however, to think that the underlying stimulus of western culture did not also influence their choices, their interactions and their being in the field at all.

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Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia

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