

Post-visit Activities

- Research fibre objects made by Indigenous peoples in other parts of Australia. Contrast with the work of the Gunbalanya fibre artists in terms of use of colour, pattern, form and techniques employed.



Injalak Arts & Crafts Centre, Gunbalanya. Photograph by John Broomfield, 2004.

- Use the notes and images made during the visit to write a review of the exhibition, with a detailed description of the work of one or more of the artists. The artists' biographies and information and images are also available on the exhibition website: <http://museumvictoria.com.au/twinedtogether>.
- Explore other relevant exhibitions, for example: *Woven Forms: Contemporary basket making in Australia* at www.object.com.au.
- Research the source of different dyes for colours, and how they are prepared.
- Research other Aboriginal owned and operated Art Centres' websites in the Top End of the Northern Territory at <http://www.aboriginalart.org/>
- Research fibre objects by Indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. For example:
 - <http://www.collectorsguide.com/fa/fa004.shtml>
 - <http://www.washington.edu/burkemuseum/baskets/index.html>
 - <http://www.nativetech.org/basketry/coilindex.html>
 - <http://www.ohs.org/exhibits/basketry.cfm>
- Find examples of fibre objects that are common in our everyday lives.
- Attempt your own basket making as part of a broader unit of work. Step by step guides can be useful. Examples:
 - <http://www.basket-making.com/how-to-make-baskets.html>
 - <http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/middle/Sue-baskets.htm>
 - <http://basketmakers.org/topics/tutorials/construction.htm>
 - <http://www.craftyarnCouncil.com/projects/desert2.html>

Gretta Matthews and the fibre artists of Arnhem Land

How did Kunwinjku fibre artists from Gunbalanya in Arnhem Land come to incorporate techniques traditional to Aboriginal communities many hundreds of kilometres to the south into their work?



Twined Together workshop at Melbourne Museum in 2003. Photography by Rodney Start.

left to right: Injalak artist, Jill Nganjmirra with Victorian artists, Gail Harradine and Vicki Couzens.

The Injalak women fibre artists use a variety of techniques in making baskets, bags and mats including coiling, which has its origins in the cultural traditions of Aboriginal people of south-eastern Australia. This technique was introduced in the 1920s to the Maung women of Goulburn Island (situated off the coast of Arnhem Land) by missionary Margaret Matthews, better known as Gretta (1877–1948). As a member of the Women’s Auxiliary for Foreign Missions, Matthews sought ‘industries’ for Aboriginal women to engage in that would contribute to the economic welfare of the mission, while at the same time instilling in them a “good Christian work ethic”. They produced lidded baskets, handbags, vases, trays and mats that were sold in the southern capital cities.

Matthews is thought to have learned the coil-bundle technique from Ngarrindjeri women of the lower Murray in South Australia during her ministry work at Glenelg. Matthews would also have been familiar with coiled baskets made by Aboriginal women elsewhere on the Murray River, as much of her childhood was spent first at Maloga Mission established by her father in NSW, and then across the river at Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station near Echuca in Victoria.

The production of painted twined baskets that had been made and used for centuries in Arnhem Land was discouraged by the missionaries because of their connections with ceremonial practices. Conical baskets did not fit the requirements of the marketplace because they would not stand unaided and were not large enough for shopping baskets. Making coiled baskets and mats became so financially important to the mission that Gretta Matthews had young girls look after babies so their mothers could continue with basket-making.

Knowledge of making coiled baskets spread to the Arnhem Land mainland within a couple of years. An exchange network in objects operated in the thirties between the Kunwinjku on the mainland and the Maung of Goulburn Island. This was documented by the anthropologist, Donald Thomson, who collected spears at Goulburn Island that had been made by Kunwinjku men. So it is possible that through the existing social and ceremonial connections with mainland groups, the idea of coiling was transferred to the point where it has become a central to the repertoire of techniques used by Aboriginal women in basket making across Arnhem Land.

However, the major differences between the Arnhem Land coiled baskets and those from the south remain the use of colour and different materials. Pandanus is the primary plant fibre used in Arnhem Land as compared to the reeds, rushes, sedges and grasses of the southern riverlands. Kunwinjku women extract dyes from locally sourced plants, like their distinctive purple and pink that is gained from the *Haemodorum coccenium* that only grows in the stone country around Gunbalanya in the wet season. Some Kunwinjku women use particular decorative or technical elements like the zig-zag open patterning that can be seen in the 19th century fibre pieces from Echuca that Matthews took to Goulburn Island as part of her teaching kit. One form that continues to show a strong connection with fibre work of the Ngarrindjeri women in South Australia is the distinctive two-sided 'sister' baskets also made by particular Kunwinjku women.(3)

For discussion

- What questions or issues does this story raise for you? Did you discover anything that surprised you?
- What do you think about the role Gretta Matthews played in the lives of the Goulburn Island women?
- What does the story suggest about the ways cultural practices change over time?



Coiling combined with knotting in a basket in wet season colours by Mary Naborhborlh. Photograph by Rodney Start, 2005

(3) The text here is adapted from L. Hamby and L. Allen, Links to the South. In L. Hamby, (ed), *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*. Injalak Arts and Crafts, Gunbalanya. Pp.59-65. 2005.