

Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken is Australia's first survey of contemporary and historical Aboriginal fibre art from western Arnhem Land. The exhibition focuses on the distinctive work of women artists from the Aboriginal community of Gunbalanya (formerly Oenpelli) and remote outstations located in the sandstone escarpment known as 'stone country'¹. *Twined Together* celebrates the work of these Aboriginal artists and highlights the individual nature of their work.

The works are all made from natural plant materials collected by the women in the bush. Collecting and transforming the materials into fibre is painstaking and requires great skill and enormous dedication to this art practice. *Pandanus spiralis* (Pandanus) is the predominant material used in most works, and the string is primarily from *Brachychiton megaphyllus* (Kurrajong). The materials used in the works are identified on exhibition labels.

The colour intensity of the material is linked to the time of collection - wet or dry season. The production of muted tones and, in some cases, no colour, is associated with the dry season. The predominance of pinks and purples from *Haemodorum coccineum*, which grows in the wet season, is a dramatic contrast to the subtle tones found in the dry. This perennial herb is related to Kangaroo Paws and is unique to the stone country. The yellows, greens, browns and blacks are made from the roots, leaves, tubers or bark of other local plants. One section of the exhibition highlights the differences found in works made during the two seasons.

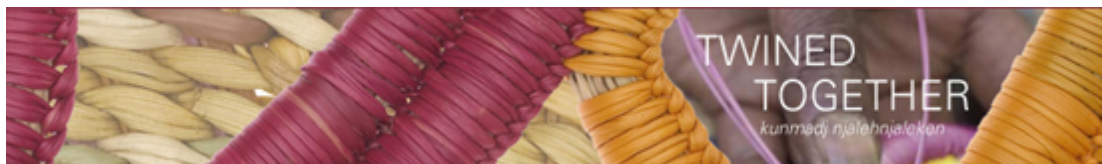
Kunwinjku is the language spoken by these women artists and Kunwinjku words have been used throughout the exhibition. *Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken* in the exhibition title means 'everything about fibre items'. *Kunmadj* is a generic word for containers and other fibre objects. Jill Nganjmirra, one of the artists and assistant curator for the exhibition, determined the terms used to describe the works and techniques. These names are included on the label for each work together with the technique used in its construction.

The oldest fibre forms from Arnhem Land are looped string bags, twined mats and twined conical baskets (see Conical Baskets, Mat Story, String Bags, Three-strand Twining in the exhibition). The earliest links with past fibre practices are demonstrated in the ancient rock art of western Arnhem Land (see Rock Art Story). Baskets and bags in particular have important ceremonial associations. Yingarna, an important ancestor for this region, appears in rock art on Injalak Hill and she is depicted carrying 15 conical baskets.

The exhibition includes baskets and bags collected around a hundred years ago². These works from museum collections demonstrate the cultural importance of twined baskets and string bags for both men and women (eg. see Men's Story or Mother and Baby Story).

¹ The Aboriginal community of Gunbalanya and its surrounding outstations are located approximately 300 kilometres east of Darwin in the Northern Territory. Gunbalanya (formerly Oenpelli) is situated close to the East Alligator River and Kakadu National Park and is home to some 1300 people.

² The historic works are drawn from the collections of Museum Victoria, the South Australian Museum and the Museums and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.



The large group of baskets called *badjkid* are made using coiling, a technique introduced into Arnhem Land by a missionary in the 1920s (see Gretta Matthews Story). Many of the forms are associated with domestic items like buckets, saucepans and bowls, while other works have names that describe the specific type of basket, like *djedjkkuyeng kunmadj wurdyawken*, a baby's basket. The techniques of twining, coiling and looping are applied variously in the works here and artists may combine techniques in a single work.

The styles of 11 artists are highlighted in the exhibition and the sharing of ideas among women can be traced through particular patterning or forms (eg. see the work of Jill Nganjmirra in 'Floral Pattern'). One form that is the exclusive domain of western Arnhem Land fibre artists is the *djerr kunngobarn*. This is a 'pandanus bag', ie. made in the form of a string bag but from Pandanus rather than bush string and maintaining the looping technique used to make string bags. Elsewhere in Arnhem Land, Pandanus is mainly used for twined conical baskets, coiled baskets and mats.

These 'pandanus bags' are either densely constructed or made with more open space. Julieanne Bangalang is a prime maker of a variation of this form known as *djerr kunngobarn baladji*, which is almost bicornual in form. The other category of 'pandanus bag' is constructed using open spaces or lace-like stitching. Missionaries taught many crafts to women including lace work. A lace-like stitch has been perfected in Pandanus by a type of coiling. It is most often used as an edge finish on coiled mats but is also used in the body of bags and baskets (refer to works in Gretta Matthews Story).

The processes for preparing colour and fibre can be seen in the exhibition video. The labels and stories (some mentioned above) provide additional information which also indicates types of colour patterns. Images of the landscape and the artists together with other examples of their work are also featured in the exhibition. The 79 contemporary works here are excellent examples of the artistry and creativity of western Arnhem Land fibre artists today, and were made or selected specifically for the exhibition. The work of specific artists can be traced through the exhibition. A short biography is provided for each artist and includes their skin, clan, moiety, country and residence of each artist (listed in that order). There are portraits of most of the artists.

Acknowledgements

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The national tour of the exhibition is supported by Visions of Australia, an Australian Government Program supporting touring exhibitions by providing funding assistance for the development and touring of cultural material across Australia.

