

Malu Minar: Art of the Torres Strait – Rediscovering culture through contemporary art

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Summary

Cairns Regional Gallery is an active, project-driven art museum focussed on supporting the preservation of indigenous cultures of Far North Queensland, Australia, through facilitating awareness at a national and international level.

An exhibition-based project of 2010, *Malu Minar: Art of the Torres Strait* is an excellent example of a cultural institution working in collaboration with contemporary indigenous artists to promote the value of traditional cultural practice and lore. This promotion is not only to those outside the region, but also to those indigenous to the Torres Strait who may not fully value their cultural practice as a useable resource. Through identifying a tangible, commercial value to their culture, many artists have not only reclaimed and resurrected their cultural traditions, but also brought a new contemporary dynamic to their cultural practice. By gaining access to anthropological collections of the past, such as the Haddon Collection of the University of Cambridge, young indigenous artists are rediscovering aspects of their heritage, lost since the arrival of Christian missionaries in the Torres Strait over a century ago. Capitalising on their cultural uniqueness, young, self-driven Torres Strait artists are showing their culture to the world and in doing so establishing themselves as a contemporary Australian art influence. With the newfound popularity and exposure of Australia's second indigenous culture, Torres Strait island communities are benefiting from a consequential increase in government funded development support.

The Torres Strait Islands are an isolated grouping of over 250 small landmasses found between the northernmost tip of continental Australia and the southern side of Papua New Guinea. The islands are stunningly beautiful and diverse with landscapes ranging from flat dry granite scrub to thickly vegetated volcanic hills. The region features a vast array of expansive reefs and coral atolls rich in life. With rising sea levels, a number of the low-lying islands, particularly the central islands of Poruma and Waraber, have been compromised by seawater; however, many of the islands remain permanently inhabited and the population of the region is estimated at 9,000. The islands are serviced by air and barge from Cairns in Far North Queensland, the closest Australian city to the Torres Straits. The central hub of the islands is Thursday Island, and from here resources are dispersed to outer lying communities.

While school children are taught in English on the islands, there are three main indigenous languages spoken: the Eastern *Meriam Mer*, Top Western *Kala Kawan Ya* and the Western dialect of *Kala Lagaw Ya*. Throughout the region Torres Strait, Creole is spoken and is universally understood. The Torres Strait culture is vastly different to that of mainland indigenous Australia; however, historically it has been absorbed into the generalist category of "indigenous" when viewed by government policy. This has done little to preserve aspects of cultural practice or encourage Torres Strait Islanders to take pride in their identity within a national context.

In the face of this geographic and socio-political isolation, Torres Strait traditional culture has seen a resurgence of interest in the last fifteen years. I would like to focus in this paper on the relevance of museums and galleries to this reawakening of traditional culture, and how century-old museum collections are being utilised to re-engage with past cultural practice, informing the rediscovery of traditional culture and in consequence assisting Torres Strait Islanders in their aim to be better represented within a contemporary Australian vernacular.

To appreciate the importance of museum collections to the conservation of traditional Torres Strait cultural activity one must look to Christian missionary activity in the late 1800s. The London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived on Erub Island in the Torres Strait in 1871 and quickly began a systematic conversion of the inhabitants to the Christian faith. Through the enforced suppression of traditional dance, ceremony and ritual the speed of this conversion was rapid. Identifying the impending

loss of what was then considered in anthropological circles a unique primitive culture, ethnologist Alfred Cort Haddon led an expedition from the University of Cambridge in March of 1898 to the Torres Strait Islands, its mission to undertake a detailed anthropological study of the peoples that inhabited the islands. The verve at which Haddon and his team collected Torres Strait material specimens during the expedition is unrivalled and was driven by the need to record and collect before traditional cultural ritual and practice was completely replaced with Christian teachings, sensibilities and European codes of dress (Herle & Philp 1998). In Haddon's writings there are numerous references to the fact that within the thirty-year period between the arrival of Reverend McFarlane and his cohort of LMS religious teachers and the Haddon led expedition, much of the indigenous religion, dance and sacred paraphernalia was lost. At the time of Haddon's expedition the destruction of many significant turtleshell masks, drums, ornaments and sacred objects had already occurred with limited resistance from Torres Strait Islanders, so successful were the European missionaries with their conversion techniques honed earlier in the Pacific Islands (Mosby & Robinson 1998).

What traditional cultural objects Haddon did manage to collect through purchase, barter, trade and gift exchange, together with film recordings of past beliefs and practices such as dances and songs, were transported back to England to be housed in the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. This extensive collection remains in the University of Cambridge and is the largest collection of traditional indigenous Torres Strait artefacts, material history and research in the world. The collection is a time capsule of language, ritual, belief systems, lore and custom, prior to the influence of missionaries. Subsequent to Haddon's collecting, European religious practice subsumed traditional Torres Strait custom. Knowledge of traditional dance, stories, spirits and ancestral figures, previously passed from generation to generation through spoken word and song, were relegated to the past through lack of currency, and what ethnic activity remained was infused with Pacific cultural practice.

At the end of the nineteenth century many ethnographic museums were the institutional base for the emerging discipline of anthropology (Herle 1998). Museums of anthropology were seen as the repositories of culture, particularly those seen as "primitive" cultures where curios and "dark" objects reinforced the "tribal" and the "unfamiliar". The Haddon collection, while not stolen booty, was still not far from the typical ethnographic collections of its day, transported from distant and dangerous lands to be arranged in the civilised glass boxes and ordered drawers of the museum. The thrill of the pagan was hidden under the veil of research and scientific enquiry. The unique quality of the Haddon collection, however, was the depth of research that was undertaken during its development. Many of the cultural collections of the late 1800s were merely groups of disparate objects and exotica, valued by their curiousness. In contrast, the quite experimental methodologies of collection used at the time by Haddon placed great emphasis on research and fact over theory and conclusion. For this reason the Haddon Collection has a level of depth and integrity, and the accompanying original research is without an overt imperial overlay common to many British collections of the same era. This is of great value to Islanders today wishing to research their traditional Islander beliefs and customs using an untainted archive. More than a century after Haddon's expedition to the Torres Strait Islands, the Haddon Collection is now the key physical resource for Torres Strait Islanders wishing to re-discover their traditions, particularly urbanised Torres Strait Islander artists seeking inspiration from their past.

Over the last twenty years Torres Strait artists have established themselves as a unique subset within contemporary Australian art. The rapid popularity of Torres Strait artwork is in many ways a result of the urbanisation of Torres Strait artists who moved from the Strait to centres such as Cairns and Townsville or the larger cities of Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra. From here artists have utilised new art media, methods and materials and have the tools and resources available to research their traditional ancestry and culture. Access to the diaries and notes of past collectors and the artefacts held in international museum collections has inspired contemporary artists to re-tell old stories. The increased accessibility through online collection databases and electronic catalogues is greatly improving the ease in which Torres Strait artists are reconnecting with the past. The resurgence of Torres Strait art and its growing representation in contemporary art of Australia has made heroes of a primary group of artists at the forefront of Torres Strait art production. Artists such as Brian Robinson, Alick Tipoti, Dennis Nona and Ken Thaiday are all represented in the National Gallery of Australia Collection and state gallery collections. Their work can be seen across Australia in the form of public sculpture and major urban commissions, and Dennis Nona has exhibited extensively overseas, with shows as far afield as Saudi Arabia and France (Kershaw et al. 2010).

Museums, in particular art galleries, are playing an important role in supporting Torres Strait Islanders to reconnect with their cultural histories. Two institutions in particular, the Gab Titui Cultural Centre and Cairns Regional Gallery, are key advocates, cultivating awareness in mainstream Australian society of Torres Strait culture.

In 2004 the Gab Titui Cultural Centre was opened on Thursday Island with the purpose of being the Torres Strait's first keeping place for historical artefacts and contemporary indigenous art. The central focus of the centre is to contribute to the maintenance, revitalisation and preservation of Torres Strait culture and the development and promotion of local indigenous art. The centre services twenty communities, is guided by the Torres Strait Regional Authority Board consisting of twenty Indigenous Members representing each of the island communities, and supports more than seventy artists across the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area of Australia. Gab Titui runs a cultural maintenance program through the Ephraim Bani Gallery, and an Arts Development program that services artists and art centres on the outer islands (Toshie et al. 2010). It is hoped that one day many of the artefacts collected by Haddon during his expedition of 1898 will be returned to the Torres Strait by the University of Cambridge Museum and will be housed in the Gab Titui Centre.

Cairns Regional Gallery is considered a fledgling gallery at only sixteen years old, however it has established a national reputation within Australia as the largest professional museum in the tropical zone of north Queensland. With a unique Pacific-rim identity, Cairns Regional Gallery has had an exhibiting and collecting emphasis on the indigenous cultures of Northern Cape York and the Torres Strait since its establishment. Significantly, in 2002 the Gallery displayed an exhibition of over sixty Torres Strait artefacts on loan from the University of Cambridge titled *Past Time: Torres Strait Islander Material from the Haddon Collection 1888–1905*. This exhibition, toured by the National Museum of Australia, was the first time since they were collected 100 years earlier that a group of artefacts from the Haddon Collection had returned to the region.

Cairns is geographically the nearest metropolis to the Torres Strait region and for this reason Cairns Regional Gallery has taken a leading advocacy role by promoting the distinctive aspects of Torres Strait culture to mainstream audiences. This is being achieved through curating exhibitions specifically designed for national and international touring.

In 1998 the Cairns Regional Gallery developed its inaugural travelling exhibition titled *Ilan Pasin (This is Our Way): Torres Strait Art*. This major survey exhibition of Torres Strait Art, curated by Tom Moesby and Brian Robinson, travelled extensively throughout Australia, and for many mainland Australian audiences this was the first time they had been introduced to the art and culture of the Torres Strait. The *Ilan Pasin* exhibition has been credited for putting the indigenous cultures of the Torres Strait “on the map”, and its accompanying catalogue is still used today as an important source text for Torres Strait research.

In 2010 Cairns Regional Gallery once again curated a major exhibition of Torres Strait art. The exhibition titled *Malu Minar: Art of the Torres Strait* is currently touring internationally, with the inaugural exhibition held at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea, New Caledonia. With the unprecedented support of participating artists, funding bodies and the wider Torres Strait community, the exhibition has succeeded in promoting the unique culture of the Torres Strait to an international audience and by doing so has supported the professional careers of indigenous artists: one of the best ways to sustain and nurture cultural practice. The exhibition will continue to travel to venues in New Zealand throughout 2012 and Canada and North America in 2013.

Malu Minar: Art of the Torres Strait is not simply a historical synopsis of Torres Strait culture, it has a curatorial rationale heavily focussed on contemporary arts practice inspired by tradition. The exhibition does not have museological content and strives to tell viewers that this is not a dying or even stagnant culture, it is growing and evolving with change and embracing new media, materials and methods to enhance the telling of its rediscovered stories. Artworks on show include carved skateboard decks, bronze sculpture, plastic woven baskets and fibreglass turtleshell masks, all examples of how traditional object-making and story-telling are being interpreted and manipulated using twenty-first-century art-making processes. By far the most popular media amongst practicing Torres Strait artists is printmaking. The emergence of printmaking as a media of choice has its origins in low relief woodcarving on traditional functional items and ceremonial objects (Robinson 2001). Artists today are using the intricate carving techniques of their forefathers on modern day lino-blocks and metal etching plates. The recent establishment of two art print studios in Cairns, Tremblay Editions and Djumbunji Press, reinforce the current dynamism and sustainability of indigenous Torres Strait printmaking, and

with the assistance of master printmakers, print works of unrivalled scale and detail are being produced by artists, telling illustratively the age old legends of the Strait. Many of these print works are featured in the *Malu Minar: Art of the Torres Strait* exhibition and are accompanied by artist-written text panels that guide visitors through the intricacies of the traditional stories told. Many of the artists represented in the touring exhibition have embraced the opportunity to share their stories with new audiences, and by doing so they are playing an important role in not simply preserving their culture, but shaping it to meet the challenges of the future.

Far from merely growing static collections, both Gab Titui and Cairns Regional Gallery are cultural institutions engaging directly with elders and young artists to preserve, display and celebrate cultural practice and provide economic opportunities to those wishing to reclaim their heritage. The galleries are also providing the tools by which mainstream audiences can better appreciate the Torres Strait region and its place within Australia's indigenous makeup. The results of this collaborative approach have seen an explosion of innovation and the financial benefits to artists have provided added incentive for their deeper research into traditional cultural life, stories, legend and myth.

References

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