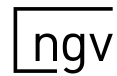


# REMEMBERING BARAK



The Ian Potter Centre  
NGV Australia



## EDUCATION RESOURCE

Barak was born in the early 1820s at Brushy Creek, near present-day Croydon, in country of the Wurundjeri people. His father, Bebejan, was a Ngurungaeta (headman) of the Wurundjeri and his mother, Tooterrie, was a Ngurai-illam-wurrung woman from near Murchison on the Goulburn River.

Barak experienced a dramatic change in his culture as European settlers colonised this land. It is said that he witnessed the signing of the 'treaty' with John Batman in 1835. In 1837 Barak attended the government's first Yarra Mission School on a site now part of the Royal Botanic Gardens. In 1844 he joined the Aboriginal Police of the Port Phillip District and in 1863 he settled at Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve on Badger Creek, near Healesville. He married three times and was the father of three children, all of whom died young. Barak became Ngurungaeta of the Wurundjeri in 1874 and was an influential spokesman for Aboriginal land rights and the continuation of his culture. His drawings were produced mainly at Coranderrk in the 1880s and 1890s. He died at Coranderrk on 15 August 1903.

**What does this photograph taken at Coranderrk in 1895 reveal to you about Barak? Compare this with the portrait also in the exhibition called 'King Barak' by his friend Victor de Pury.**

Johannes Heyer Australia 1872–1945 *William Barak at work on the drawing 'Ceremony' at Coranderrk 1899* sepia toned gelatin silver photograph 8.5 x 8.2 cm (image) Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide Santos Fund for Aboriginal Art, 2000 (2000-8PH11)



## BARAK'S MOST IMPORTANT SUBJECT MATTER IS CEREMONY

Barak's *Ceremony* late 1890s shows a 'corroboree' at which songs and dances are being performed. Barak suggests the music of the scene by capturing the lively movements of the figures, which seem to project and recede in space. Two elders wearing possum skin cloaks, beating clapsticks, are surrounded by three rows of female figures in the lower part of the composition. The women turn towards the elders, or face each other in pairs, their bodies swaying in a serpentine design to the beat of the music. Above the two ceremonial fires, male dancers with tribal markings on their faces, perform using boomerangs.

Barak's use of watercolour in the background creates subtle effects of light and shade, changing tonally from beige to yellow ochre and tan that also creates an illusion of perspective.

Look at other examples of Barak's drawings of ceremonies. What similarity in design can you see? Look also for subtle differences.

## THIS HUNTING DRAWING, MAINLY PAINTED IN PRUSSIAN BLUE AND SEPIA, IS A SUBJECT RARELY DEPICTED BY BARAK

Barak's use of ochres and charcoal reflects art made in ceremonial contexts but he also used pencil, watercolour and gouache. Barak was quite adventurous in his use of colour and mixed different shades of blue, pink and green.

In *Group hunting animals* 1890s Wurundjeri hunters dressed in long possum skin cloaks carry spears and a stone axe. They stalk native reptiles, birds and animals including emu, kangaroo, wallaby, turtle, turkey, platypus, echidna, snake, dingo and lyrebird.

Compare this work to *Ceremony* c. 1895 and others that include native animals.

Notice Barak's use of colour in combination with earth pigments and charcoal in *Ceremony* 1890s, *Ceremony with rainbow serpent* c.1880s and other works.

*Group hunting animals* 1890s watercolour over pencil and charcoal on paper 44.6 x 57.7 cm (image and sheet).  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Gift of Michael and Traudl Moon, 1995 (1995.44)





## FIGURES WEARING POSSUM SKIN CLOAKS ARE ALSO A MAJOR SUBJECT IN BARAK'S ART

Possum skin cloaks, elaborately decorated with designs on the skin side of the pelts and worn with fur touching the skin for warmth, are an important expression of Koorie culture.

*Figures in possum skin cloaks* 1898, shows a ceremonial gathering of men dressed in possum skin cloaks with a centipede like form in the centre and trees shown in lateral perspective in the top section of the composition. These trees are placed at regular intervals between each pair of figures, their cloaks patterned, one by one, with verticals then parallel meandering lines. This is not found in Barak's other representations of possum-skin cloaks.

Examine other Barak drawings and photographs of Aboriginal people, which show figures wearing possum skin cloaks. How many skins do you think it would take to make one of these cloaks? How would they have been made and worn?

*Figures in possum skin cloaks* 1898 pencil, wash, charcoal solution, gouache and earth pigments on paper 57.0 x 88.8 cm (image and sheet) inscribed on reverse: Xmas 1898 / Painted by "King Billy" at / Coranderrk station Healesville Victoria/ Australia / King of the Yarra tribe of Aboriginals. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased, 1962 (1215a-5)

Michael Nichols and Graham Parker from Education School Programs, National Gallery of Victoria wrote this resource in conjunction with Judith Ryan Senior Curator and Julie Gough, Curator of Indigenous Art, National Gallery of Victoria. Reference has also been made to the important essays by Joy Murphy-Wandin, great niece of William Barak and Carol Cooper from the National Museum of Australia in the catalogue accompanying *Remembering Barak*.