

Bark Salon: on display in Wurrdha Marra

The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia | 12 October 2024 | FREE



31 July 2024: Featuring more than 160 bark paintings hung en masse from floor to ceiling, ***Bark Salon*** is a large-scale display of First Nations bark painting that references – and subverts – the traditional European salons of the 18th and 19th centuries. On display from 12 October within the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia’s dedicated First Nations galleries, Wurrdha Marra, ***Bark Salon*** offers a uniquely Australian counterpoint to this European tradition and highlights the extraordinary creativity and diversity of bark painting from the NGV Collection.

A thought-provoking First Peoples response to NGV International’s popular Salon Gallery, ***Bark Salon*** is designed to emulate the style and atmosphere of the salons popular across Europe, including at the Royal Academies in London and Paris. During the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, the salon served as a critical platform for artists to exhibit their work to potential patrons. The space, hung *en masse*, was notably democratic; it welcomed not only aristocrats and the bourgeoisie but also individuals from diverse social and economic backgrounds. The salon also functioned as a pivotal forum for dictating aesthetic tastes, which in turn inspired rebellion from artists experimenting with subject matter, form and tradition.

Bark Salon offers audiences the chance to trace the monumental shifts in the bark medium: radical experimentation, the development from figuration to abstraction and developments in medium and form. Through this art-historical framework and salon style, audiences are able to appreciate the synergies of subject, style and technique between the works on display.

The exhibition spans eight decades from the 1950s to today and features bark paintings from across the country, including Yirrkala, Melville Island, Ramingining, Elcho Island, Kalumburu, Maningrida and more. The exhibition features works by leading and pioneering figures, including Barrupu Yunupiju, 'Nyapanyapa Yunupiju, David Namirlmirl Mangiru, Wally Mandarrk, Rosie Karadada, Nonggirnga Marawili, Goobalathaldin Dick Roughsey, Dhambit Munungurr and more. The presentation also emphasises bark paintings by women, which is a particular strength of the NGV Collection.

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Since the early twentieth century, Indigenous artists have been transposing traditional designs and stories onto bark as a way of communicating their profound connection to Country. The material is sourced from the Stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*), which is cut from the tree in the wet season when the sap is rising. Traditional ochre pigments in red, yellow, black and white are used, but more recently artists have experimented with acrylic paints to create vibrantly colourful expressions of the land, sea and air.

Highlight works from the display include Naminapu Maymuru-White's *Milngiyawuy (River of Stars)*, 2020. The artist is celebrated for her works depicting Milngiyawuy, which in English refers to the Milky Way, or River of Stars. Renowned for her innovative monochromatic ochre compositions, Maymuru-White's work navigates the celestial tapestry, intertwining the tangible and metaphysical realms.

John Mawurndjul's *Mardayin design at Mukkamukka*, 2003, is a further highlight. Mawurndjul's works explore the mardayin: sacred law, objects, localities and species. Mardayin also refers to a ceremony performed by Kuninjku peoples, and this particular work situates the mardayin at Mukkamukka, a moiety site along the Mann River. The fine cross-hatching effect (or raark) is composed with red and yellow ochres and white clay pigment, devising a hypnotic, sweeping depiction of Mukkamukka.

Also on display is *Lightning in the rock*, 2015, by Ms Nongirrnja Marawili. During the 1980s, Marawili began assisting her late husband, Djutadjuta Mununggurr - a leader of the Djapu clan - to paint. This formative time enabled Marawili the authority to paint Djapu narratives, a trajectory she sustained after the passing of her husband. This work represents the Mundukul, the Lightning Snake, who lives deep beneath the sea. The artist shows the electric 'curse' that the snake spits into the sky in the form of lightning, and the spray of the sea trying to shift the immovable rock foundation of the Madarrpa people. The scale of *Lightning in the rock* captures the intensity of the narrative, at the time it was painted, it was one of the largest bark-panel ever made – a testament to Ms N. Marawili's bold and experimental practice.

Visitors will be encouraged to learn more about each bark through digital labels.

Colin Brooks, Minister for Creative Industries said: 'This extraordinary Bark Salon display highlights the breadth of talent, creativity and storytelling of First Peoples artists from across the country. We encourage all Victorians, and visitors to our creative state, to make their way to NGV Australia for this unique and free display which opens in October.'

Tony Ellwood AM, Director, NGV said: 'Since the NGV began acquiring the work of First Peoples, bark painting has been a focus and strength. The NGV has been working with First Nations communities to build one of the country's most significant collections of bark painting that represents the dynamism and diversity of the art form. This creative and thought-provoking display, referencing the traditional European salon hang, offers an opportunity for audiences to experience some of the icons of this collection in surprising and unexpected ways.'

Wurrdha Marra is the NGV's dynamic and ever-changing collection space dedicated to displaying masterpieces and new works from the NGV's First Nations collection. Wurrdha Marra means 'Many Mobs' in the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung language and is the name bestowed upon this gallery space by the Wurundjeri Council.

Bark Salon is on display from 12 October 2024 at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia at Fed Square. Entry is FREE. For further information, please visit the NGV website: [NGV.MELBOURNE](https://www.ngv.com.au)

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