

Colonialization and commodification of First Nations art: First Nations art in cultural institutions and their implications for policy and practice

Laura Malloggi
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan

Laura Malloggi is a recent graduate from the master's degree in Methods and Topics in Arts Management, interfaculty of Economics and Literature, at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan.

Paul Harrison
Deakin University, Melbourne

Dr. Paul Harrison is a Senior Lecturer and the Unit Chair of Consumer Behaviour in the Department of Marketing in Deakin Business School. His work has been published in a wide range of international journals and conference proceedings and has informed policy and business practice in Australia and internationally.

ABSTRACT

This research examines the implications of the commercialization of Indigenous art for its role within the contemporary art system when managed by Western art market agents and intermediaries. Through the lens of case studies and interviews specifically with regards to contemporary Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, a preliminary understanding of cultural institutions as agents of change is established, with prospective for generalization and adaptability to different contexts. The present work also holds potential in understanding what change needs cultural institutions are contributing to as, notably, those who hold power within a particular field or system can influence its processes. This research intersects with various societal, economic and cultural dimensions, influencing and reflecting power dynamics, social inequalities and political agendas.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, First Nations art, Commodification of art, Categorization, Art market intermediaries

Introduction

The initial aim of this paper is to understand some of the complex strategies employed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to protect vestiges of their sacred storytelling traditions, amidst the inexorable march toward commodification encouraged by Western colonizers. Art markets are characterized by several interactions among relevant stakeholders such as artists, art dealers and general audiences. Further, we argue that such dynamics can often generate and reiterate power imbalances between different actors.

In order to investigate respondents' perspective and approach to Australian Aboriginal art and their potential role within the industry, case studies and unstructured interviews constitute the methodology to this research. Overall, this study aims to shed light on the active role played by art market intermediaries in employing their position within a network of powerful stakeholders to assess their potential as agents of change. The scale of the topic is extensive, ranging from more historical, post-colonial and artistic matters through to issues of identity, power imbalances and sovereignty. Of necessity, this paper's focus is more specific.

The colonization and commodification of First Nations Art

Before presenting our analysis in the following paragraphs, it is essential to understand the context of Australian First Nations art. As premise, in the present work, art by “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders” is collectively referred to as “Aboriginal” art and often applied synonymously.

First Nations people of Australia have created art and generated their own artistic expressions for more than sixty thousand years, initially to express their traditional culture while also preserving their sacred knowledge, which varies considerably by region and community. In fact, Aboriginal art represents people’s identity and culture and mirrors religious beliefs, ancestral bonds as well as the relationships with their own land and its creation, all of which is a manifestation of the ongoing journey of ancestral spirits onto earth, known as “Dreaming” (Yvonnou, 2012). Often performed as a collective act, art is an expression of First Nations people early cultural stories, customs, and ceremonies to be passed down to future generations. As such, the value of First Nations cultural artefacts never arises simply from its physical existence but rather is inextricably connected to its use and educational purpose in a broader sense.

As Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art accounts for a fundamental part of this research, it is appropriate to briefly contextualize its formation and evolution as a market category, together with its peculiar characteristics, while emphasizing its unique power dynamics and the role of art intermediaries operating within. For this purpose, concepts drawn from decolonization studies and decolonial literature constitute our reference framework (Maddison & Nakata, 2020; Martineau & Ritskes, 2014).

The influence of Said’s (1979) conceptualization of orientalism on Australian First Nations art is evident in the way indigenous artistic expressions have been perceived and commodified within Western art institutions, being subjected to the pressures of conforming to Western sensibilities (Mosby, 1996). The imposition of Western sensibilities and aesthetic framework has often led to the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of Aboriginal art, resulting in the loss of its true cultural meaning. The Western gaze, shaped by an Orientalist perspective, has often exoticized and essentialized Indigenous art, reducing it to mere artifacts for Western consumption, thereby undermining its cultural significance and spiritual dimensions (Gall et al., 2021).

The pressure to conform to Western art standards has also led to the homogenization and commodification of Australian Aboriginal art, often catering to the expectations and preferences of Western audiences and markets. This process has sometimes resulted in the dilution of the authentic cultural meanings embedded in Indigenous artistic practices as artists navigate the demands of the Western art markets and institutions (Kendall et al., 2011). Therefore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists “transformed aesthetic forms to better fit the criteria and the needs of the global art scene” (Seppä, 2010), evolving into a form of art that could be more suitable for purchase from collectors and more easily appreciated in exhibitions. In addition, scholars acknowledge the pressure of the international art market: “during the 1980s and 1990s, art dealers, auction houses, and collectors became an important part of the transformation of the Aboriginal art into a globally celebrated product” (Seppä, 2010). Belk and Groves (1999), acknowledging the progressive shift in the meanings of Aboriginal art as it progresses through the channels of distribution, suggest the need for a more careful approach in order to “find a balance between the desires of Aboriginal art producers and consumers” (Belk and Groves, 1999).

The emergence of Australian Aboriginal art as a category

In recent years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art has witnessed steady “aesthetic expansion”, defined as “growing appreciation for different aesthetics and styles of Indigenous art into the art markets” (Chow et al., 2022).

However, the categorical aesthetics under our analysis came to be defined by its interplay with Western artistic practices, which influenced traditional First Nations art and its visual themes. Although such subtle concept appears to be crucial in shifting the framework through which Aboriginal and First Nations art is examined, it has been so far overlooked in literature on the topic and deemed “of limited use to the practice of determining how a particular work of art should be valued or traded” (Khaira & Wadhvani, 2010).

Most importantly, when balancing cultural and commercial instances within the context of First Nations art, intermediaries must remember that: “The art of painting for the Indigenous people is not just the commercial thing [even though it is destined for sale]. But is also an act of cultural maintenance. If people didn’t paint those paintings, they will lose their stories” (Chow, Carrington & Ozanne, 2022).

Therefore, category meanings “need to be understood as products of not just proximate social, cognitive, and economic processes, but also of their ongoing interpretive relation to the deeper historical contexts” (Khaire & Wadhvani, 2010).

Morphy (1998) reports how during colonial times Aboriginal art was considered a sole prerogative of ethnographic museums, that prioritized qualitative “authenticity” of the artworks allocated to their collections. Therefore, instead of properly “introducing Aboriginal aesthetics to Western audiences and recognizing the value of Aboriginal culture” (Morphy, 1998), ethnographic museums denied Aboriginal art the status of art.

Of foremost importance is understanding the approach of Colonial Settlers regarding the creative practices of First Nations people. Undisputedly, the Colonialist approach towards “non-western” cultures and their art have manifested in ruthless and often brutal ways, being denied the proper recognition even from art institutions (Johnson, 2007; Jones, Booth & Acker, 2016). However, this was not always the case. Extensive literature supports the findings presented by Seppä (2010), who explains that, for nearly two centuries, the first European settlers in Australia refused to acknowledge the existence of Indigenous Art, also referred to as “Aboriginal art”, due to the supposed inferior intellect of individual artmakers. Seppä (2010), also highlights how the colonialist attitude towards non-western cultures resulted in the rejection of First Nations art as “high art”, in it did not respond to Western artistic and aesthetic standards. Although the widespread taste and Western aesthetic metrics valid during those centuries were wrongfully elevated to generalized paradigm, it nonetheless contributed to support substantially the propagation and application of colonialist ideology fueling a prejudiced view of First Nations art, for the sake of which all other viewpoints were suppressed. An attempt to protect sacred traditions led to remarkable changes in techniques and simplified designs (Coleman & Keller, 2006; Johnson, 1994), for example with the increased use of the “dotting” (Seppä, 2010). A shift in perspective is reported after the Second World War once many colonies fought for and obtained independence. This renewed climate of change gave birth to what Seppä (2010) calls “post-colonial art”.

Conversely, the contemporary Australian Indigenous art market has a relatively short history that started since the 1970s, benefitting from the climate of change pushed forward in Australia by the intersection between social movements and political objectives. Its production and distribution into the artworld ecosystem were prompted under the growing Western economy model based on capitalism, which could benefit from a solid marketing infrastructure. According to Myers (2002), a substantial change occurred with the establishment of artists’ cooperative Papunya Tula in 1972, where the first shift from traditional bark or body paintings to the use of canvases and acrylics was witnessed. This represents a critical change in Aboriginal artistic expression, that is inherently ephemeral in its material form (McLean, 2016; Phillips & Steiner, 1999; Pinney & Thomas, 2001). However, the disclosure of sacred knowledge being represented on canvas encountered widespread disapproval among First Nations communities (Coleman & Keller, 2006; Johnson, 1994), given that such knowledge is often a prerogative of rightful elders and individuals within the community. Yet, the demand of the market compelled artists to adapt the subject of their artifacts, progressively simplifying their styles and “attenuating the references to the sacred” (Coleman & Keller, 2006). As such, it appears that the shift to what are nowadays considered distinguishing elements arose from both an act of self-censorship and an urge to adapt to Western market standards. Over time, the emphasis on marketability and commercial success within the Western art world has at times overshadowed the intrinsic cultural and spiritual significance of Indigenous art forms, perpetuating a cycle of cultural appropriation and misrepresentation (Kleinert, 2010; Smith et al., 2020). Despite an initial development to the market of Aboriginal and First Nations cultural expressions, those artworks employing a medium more conformed to Western practices of “acrylic painting on canvas, did not meet standards of “legitimacy” as defined by ethnographic museums that pursued “authenticity” over all” (Ueda, 2021). McLean (2011) reports *Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art, 1788–1988*, held in 1988 at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide, to be the first international exhibition to categorize Aboriginal and First Nations art as distinct discipline of contemporary art thus gaining its

place within museums and art galleries, subsequently initiating the need for recognition and assignation of meaning (Myers, 2002; Ueda, 2021). Category formation or redefinition commonly occurs with reinforcement from experts of the art fields. Similarly in this case, the contribution of Smith's work (1991) is acknowledged as providing the "first substantial theoretical framework for Aboriginal art to be understood as contemporary art" (Geissler, 2020). Only recently, an alternative label of "hybrid" was suggested by McLean (2016), referring to "its production as an adaptive response to an outside culture, which in its making maintained its tribal obligations to the authenticity of its traditional cultural inspiration" (Geissler, 2020). Since the 1970s, in part thanks to targeted policies following the election of the Whitlam government, important steps were taken concerning Australian Aboriginal and First Nations art not only to safeguard its production but also to support its unsecured market such as the creation of the Aboriginal Arts Board within the Australian Council aimed at supporting cultural initiatives (Johnson, 2007).

While the impact of cultural policies on Aboriginal and First Nations art became more and more incisive for international success, many argue that "federal policy increasingly focused on Aboriginal arts and crafts as demonstrations of nationalist ideals, rather than of cultural preservation" (Jones, Booth & Acker, 2016). In fact, since the end of the 1990s, the art market suffered from insufficient control on Aboriginal art centers, which had become the predominant intermediary for the production and sale of Aboriginal art on the market (Jones, Booth & Acker, 2016), as well as on art dealers who neglected their duties in ensuring provenance control (Myers, 2002).

Myers (2002) recognizes that establishing the acceptance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art into the modern and contemporary art system requires the coordination of local practices, governance policies as well as the establishment of aligned market practices. Drawing from Bennet (2009) and Harrison's (2013) findings, Jones, Booth & Acker (2016) suggest a conceptualization of the Aboriginal art industry as "assemblage", i.e., the "set of relations between institutions, [...] people and technologies that facilitate the circulation of objects and people" which influences the representation of Aboriginal artefacts within cultural institutions and their management by art intermediaries. As such, in his examination of European engagement with contemporary Aboriginal art, Thomas (1999) acknowledges the necessity of an "enabling situation" when displaying cultural artefacts. This means that merely presenting the artefacts is not sufficient: Aboriginal and First Nations art has artistic, cultural as well as historical significance that requires in-depth investigation and, consequently, calls for appropriate introduction and intermediation to enable and facilitate public viewing or sale.

The role of art market intermediaries

Within this discourse, Preece & Kerrigan (2015) argue that "stakeholders negotiate the value of art within relationship networks" (Chow, Carrington & Ozanne, 2022), thus either acting as gatekeepers (Foster, Borgatti & Jones, 2011) or fueling processes of value co-construction within the network itself. Khaire (2017) supports the idea of intermediaries' intervention as an "act of cultural influence". Allegedly, art markets involve and require "complex interactions among a variety of stakeholders, including artists, consumers, art intermediaries, policy makers and the public" (Chow, Carrington & Ozanne, 2022). Drawing on their analysis of the Australian Indigenous art market, Chow (et al., 2022) explored the role of art intermediaries as "power brokers", trying to navigate requests, ambitions and intents of various stakeholders working with Australian Aboriginal art while having to balance "inherent tensions and power struggles" within networks of stakeholders, typical of Aboriginal and First Nations art dealers operating mainly within Western frameworks of trading art. Change agents use art as a tool to "challenge the status quo, disrupt the marketplace, question institutional power and control, and establish systems of provision and exchange founded on Indigenous worldviews" (Chow, Carrington & Ozanne, 2022). Therefore, not only change agents attempt to promote more respectful customary practices within the art market but they also work towards normalizing such practices.

Following a polarizing view of art and market as dichotomies, the production and consumption of artistic creations translates into a commodified version with its introduction on the art market, hence corrupting to a certain extent its authenticity (Borgbald, 2019; Plesa, 2023). Conversely, rather than seeing artworks as mere traded commodities, change agents use art as a political means to transform society. In fact, scholars have assessed an inherent divergence between cultural and commercial interests within the art market (Brown & Patterson, 2000; Fillis, 2006, 2011), although change agents

strive to balance both interests; nonetheless “cultural integrity” constitutes their crucial prerogative over “financial gains”. Given that audiences’ respect and understanding of Aboriginal cultures and perspectives are fundamental for achieving political transformation, intermediaries often work with a wide variety of subjects and multiple stakeholders to spark change. Therefore, “change agents [...] balance cultural and commercial interests by prioritizing their cultural advocacy in the markets through political resurgence” (Chow, Carrington, & Ozanne, 2022).

The corollary explanation to employing the Actor Network Theory framework for methodological flexibility is that actors achieve their intended results thanks to their joint efforts by combining various characterizing category elements. In fact, the ANT perspective allows to combine human actors with nonhuman entities (George et al., 2023; Latour, 2005) and explore their influential links as well as their impact on each other (Bencherki, 2017; Holmqvist et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2021). These cooperative interactions among participants in art world “affect the modalities by which potential audiences receive and interpret art works, and progressively bring about a reconfiguration of the organizational models underlying the creation, production and distribution of art” (Patriotta & Hirsch, 2016). It has been observed that while some art intermediaries strive to foster decolonizing practices, others seem to reiterate a more prepotent colonial approach to the art market. Therefore, we acknowledge that a “cooperative agency of multiple social actors, who take distinctive positions in relation to institutionally defined conventions” (Patriotta & Hirsch, 2016) drives art market innovation. While it is true that innovations stem from exogenous forces to the art market (Patriotta & Hirsch, 2016), endogenous stimuli from market actors also appear to be critical in triggering change. Importantly, ANT has been used to provide insights into processes of change as it offers a critical framework to investigate intermediaries’ efforts to decolonize the art market, unveil individual interests and hinder power structures that are already in place. Therefore, higher benefits are secured “if artists, galleries, critics, auction houses, museums and collectors manage to work in unison towards the common goal” (Rodner & Thomson, 2013).

Implications of Categorization for Cultural policies

The imposition of Western values and methodologies in the documentation and curation of Aboriginal art has further contributed to the distortion of its cultural meanings. Kleinert’s (2010) study highlights how, for example, the postcolonial imposition of the dichotomic authentic/inauthentic labeling on First Nations art has undeniably shaped its perception on the market and at the public eye (Jones, Booth & Acker, 2016). The use of Western tools and frameworks to interpret and analyze Indigenous art often fails to capture the rich cultural symbolism and interconnectedness of meanings embedded in artistic traditions, potentially leading to a superficial understanding that does not fully convey the depth and complexity of artistic expressions (Brown et al., 2013; Mosby, 1996). This imposition of Western epistemologies and methodologies in the interpretation of Indigenous art has perpetuated a disconnected narration between the true cultural meanings of Australian First Nations art and its representation within Western art institutions (Laird et al., 2021). Nonetheless, Mosby (1996) recognizes an interdependent relationship “between Indigenous and non-indigenous societies”: in other words, the art market must ultimately avoid exerting a negative impact on artists and communities (Mosby, 1996). It follows as equally necessary to equip audiences with adequate set of cultural concepts as well as historical background on First Nations art, to avoid both decontextualization and perpetration of cultural stigmas belonging to the past (Myers, 2002). Today, Indigenous-led institutes and organizations such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) strive to pursue and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural resurgence (AIATSIS, 2024). Another important organization operating specifically within the arts and culture sector is The Indigenous Art Code Ltd. (IartC), an Australian ethical charter to market Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. The Code consists in “a set of rules and guidelines that dealers, which can be both Indigenous and non-Indigenous businesses, commit to follow to ensure ethical practices and fair treatment of artists” (IartC, 2023). Research shows that many Aboriginal artists are still underrepresented and are often faced with disparity in price evaluations (Bell, 2002; Mosby, 1996). Hence, the action of such organizations becomes increasingly fundamental to ensure ethical sourcing and dealing practices on the market.

Methodology and Discussion of Findings

The empirical context is constituted by qualitative data from primary sources, as well as secondary resources to carry out a deductive analysis of the topic under investigation. The methodological foundation of the present research consists of unstructured interviews and case studies to gather primary and secondary data which, collectively considered, serve to provide an evidence-based response to the proposed research question. Specifically, interviews were conducted with knowledgeable individuals from art market institutions who possess expertise relevant to the research objectives. Among the selected case study are, a private Italian art gallery, a French private art gallery, a public French museum and a private Swiss art foundation. The four respondents wish to remain anonymous. Given the subjective nature of the topic, a qualitative approach to sourcing information was opted for. The qualitative approach used, characterized by the use of multiple data sources, allowed to compile a thorough examination of the role of Western art market intermediaries as categorizing subjects as well as their potential influence as power brokers.

Their ongoing efforts to engage not only in exhibiting art but also in cultural activities reveal a deeper objective of cultural relevance that goes beyond commercial gains, fostering integrational dynamics among artists and art market intermediaries. The interviewees highlight how norms regarding fruition of art that have been strengthened and standardized over the centuries still dictate the way people observe art, especially in a museum or gallery environment. Given that intermediaries are usually the main point of contact between collectors and First Nations cultural artefacts, their mediation and discourse can influence both perception and understanding of the concepts that the artists aim to convey. For example, the ruling categorization in terms of authenticity reveals its instability as it appears to remain strongly linked to Eurocentric perspectives and criteria of a colonizing culture. According to their experience, art intermediaries pushed to create a Western market for Aboriginal and First Nations art, shaping new market rules as well as eliciting a change in production at the origin. These tendencies presume the existence of a tacit agreement on what is marketable and what not among key market actors.

Through their membership to The Indigenous Art Code, the respondents are striving to ensure artists' fair involvement to the market as well as to guarantee traceability of the artworks regarding their origins and production sites, whilst following a non-discriminatory approach. Hence, not only should daily operations respect the standards introduced by The Code, but also observe tacit rules implied by the nature of the artworks. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of reconnecting artefacts and artworks with descendants and their original communities as well as building and nurturing a safe space for open dialogue between artists and intermediaries, for instance with museum curators or art advisors.

What often contributes to confer legitimacy is the embeddedness of the artist and artworks within a strong support network of art dealers and stakeholders i.e., art galleries, auction houses, art advisors, who place cultural artefacts strategically on the market. Nowadays, gallerists, curators, and art collectors exhibit or trade First Nations art and contemporary Australian Aboriginal art operating within a strong network of actants that is still largely ruled by Western values and conventions (Acker, 2016; Ashford, 2007). While many Australian art organizations strive to promote the involvement of people of Aboriginal background or belonging to Aboriginal communities in their curatorial practices and cultural policy programs, cultural institutions all over Europe have yet to introduce a similar approach. Therefore, with their actions intermediaries can contribute to avoid the reiteration of colonized methodologies in exhibiting or marketing contemporary Aboriginal art, for instance by addressing their relationships with artists or by promoting fair sourcing of paintings and cultural artefacts. As such, a potential strategy would be to ensure the appointment of curators with Aboriginal backgrounds and establish collaborations with Australian Aboriginal cultural institutions as common practice, hence strengthening the network of actors involved in trading Aboriginal art.

Limitations of the study and future applications

While it is acknowledged that the pool of interviewees is limited, such approach benefits from being strongly grounded in the literature review. In addition, as the present research is focused on the Western art market, the four case studies were selected among European institutions and appear to be sufficiently representative of the major tendencies in dealing with Australian Aboriginal art on the European art market. Hence, thanks to a careful selection of relevant case studies, the information acquired can constitute a solid base for theoretical generalization. Accordingly, availing of the concepts brought to light by our findings further investigation on virtuous examples represented by cultural institutions already implementing decolonizing practices within their current operations can provide a more comprehensive understanding of their effectiveness.

Conclusion

This research concludes with the understanding of Australian Aboriginal art as a creative activity in constant evolution and an equally important example of cultural survival and adaptation. First Nations art is powerful force that can serve as a tool for decolonization movements. Therefore, cultivating its role in the contemporary art system, additional perspectives emerge on how art market stakeholders around the world can design more thoughtful and awareness building exhibition practices in the future, while maintaining links to traditional culture.

For several decades, the imposition onto Aboriginal artefacts of rigid labels to achieve both authentication and approval from socially and economically powerful Western agents led to a representation of Aboriginal culture that mirrored Western criteria of evaluation. As such, claims were imposed on cultural objects and supported by the commercial interests of prominent market intermediaries.

All respondents recognize the role of art market intermediaries in shaping the acknowledgement of Aboriginal art on the market. Yet, those organizations demonstrated outstanding ability to balance their commercial and cultural identities, showing that intermediaries can bring change, leveraging on their power position within commercial networks. For such reasons, these case studies represent successful models of conduct as they aim to disrupt consolidated standards while fostering virtuous practices in dealing with Australian Aboriginal culture and artefacts, for instance by ensuring ethical sourcing of the artworks or giving voice to Aboriginal representation in artworks' transactions.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Thematic Area	Questions
Categorization and Evaluation processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What about Aboriginal art has aesthetic and economic value? Is it linked to its characteristics (for example, colors, symbols, meanings) or to the validation by other relevant western art market actors?• What is the intention behind presenting an artwork as suitable for market exchange, versus a colonized / decolonized artwork?• According to your experience, what are the processes through which categories regarding Australian Aboriginal art emerge or are constructed by relevant art market actors? Have these meanings found increased stability over time?
Role of art market intermediaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What change are actors contributing / trying to contribute to? For instance, to decolonize the western art market, build awareness around Aboriginal artistic and cultural practices, symbols and knowledge.• According to your experience, have you ever perceived power imbalances between art market intermediaries and the artists? How does your institution address any power imbalances that may exist?• What potential do you see for intermediaries to consider themselves agents of change and promote decolonization practices within the industry? How can they become “change agents”? What benefits does it bring?