



REVIEW

ACU Art Collection: First Impressions

The development of the art and material culture collections of some of Australia's older universities were initially seeded by the singular passions of one or more committed academics, who began to collect objects that both reflected and resonated with their areas of research and teaching. At the University of Sydney for example, the collection of Etruscan, Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities developed by former Provost Sir Charles Nicholson, and the extensive natural history collection of Alexander Macleay were to spawn the creation of the Nicholson and Macleay museums¹ (which were combined with the opening of the new Chau Chuk Wing Museum in 2020), just as the University of Melbourne's historic Ewing, Grimwade, and Leonhard Adam collections² were to later form the basis of the University of Melbourne Art Collection, which falls under the custodial care of the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Initially starting as quiet, highly personal and often somewhat idiosyncratic initiatives, acknowledgement of the collective significance of these cultural collections has often led, over time, to the formalisation of their storage and care, and to the building of public-facing museums and galleries in which to house them.

For a younger institution such as the Australian Catholic University (ACU) however, the development of an art collection can be carefully strategised and crafted from inception. Accordingly, the university's collection of more than 1,000 works of art (ranging from the 13th century to the present day), under the guidance and care of curator Caroline Field, clearly reflects ACU's Catholic values, and through its diverse and rich holdings it is indeed possible to track a shared interest across the works in both the spiritual and contemplative. While artworks are displayed on the university's various campuses for the enjoyment of the university cohort, the lack of a dedicated gallery

¹ The Nicholson Museum was founded in 1857, the Macleay in 1887.

² These collections are formally known as the Ewing Collection, the Russell and Mab Grimwade 'Miegunyah' Collection and the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture.

could be seen to prevent broader community engagement. However, a major publication such as *ACU Art Collection: First Impressions* achieves much in terms of fostering wider knowledge and promotion of the University's holdings, and in this instance, given the book's thematic focus, its growing collection of Indigenous art. Collectively, the considered and insightful texts within this handsome volume also thoughtfully position the First Nations stories and beliefs contained within the art as central to a better understanding of who and what we are as a nation.

Bringing together the perspectives of esteemed Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers ranging from Professor Marcia Langton AO, Margie West AM and Djon Mundine OAM to Dr Jacqueline Healy, Henry Skerritt and Will Stubbs (to name but a few), this lavishly illustrated publication contains focussed writing on a diverse range of Indigenous artworks within the ACU Art Collection, providing insights into the artist, their wider practice and the illustrated art work in the collection. Importantly, the work acquired by artists such as Daniel Boyd, Shirley Purdy and Michael Riley, among others, also conveys the complexity and ongoing impact of the Church and mission culture on Indigenous communities, and the capacity of many First Nations people to lovingly hold Christian and traditional spiritual beliefs in tandem as they make their way through our contemporary world. This concept is powerfully embodied in the Coming of the Light ceremony – as depicted in Franklin Jacob Mye's commanding linocut, *Celebrating the Civilisation and Christianity on Erub July 1, 2015* – which celebrates the adoption of Christianity across the islands of the Torres Strait in the late 19th-century. As Kate Wragge writes:

Torres Strait Islanders of all faiths living on the islands and on the mainland come together annually to honour the anniversary of the Coming of the Light, celebrated in a festival like no other in Australia. Activities include church services, and a re-enactment of the landing at Kemus, on Erub. Hymn singing, feasting and Ailan Dance strengthen community and family ties.³

Released in 2020, *First Impressions* is part of a growing suite of thematic publications on the ACU Art Collection: *ACU Art Collection: A New Perspective* (2020) and *Contemporary Visions: Works from the ACU Art Collection* (2022). Singularly and as a group, these volumes will serve as invaluable resources for students, curators and art historians, and the interested public alike.

Review by Kelly Gellatly, April 2025

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³ Kate Wragge, "Celebrating the Civilisation and Christianity on Erub July 1" in Field, Caroline (ed.), *ACU Art Collection: First Impressions*, Australian Catholic University (ACU), 2020, p. 79.