

## **Appropriation or Appreciation? Margaret Preston and the search for a uniquely 'Australian' Aesthetic**

The aesthetic definition of Australia and its national identity has been a concern of settler artists since invasion. Each successive wave of artists has claimed to have invented a purely Australian art, removed from European influence. However, the efforts of the artists before her were not satisfactory to Margaret Preston. Prior to Preston, artists like Frederick McCubbin, Louis Buvelot and even John Glover had attempted to develop an Australian visual identity.<sup>1</sup> These attempts were all rooted in traditional European styles, from the Picturesque to Impressionism.<sup>2</sup> Preston, who trained under McCubbin and took inspiration from renowned modernists like Pablo Picasso,<sup>3</sup> felt a strong need to *truly* create a unique Australian visual style. Taking on Picasso's interest in 'the Primitive', Preston looked towards Australian Indigenous visual culture to inspire her ideal of Australian art. Thus, in this essay I will argue that Margaret Preston appropriated visual motifs and other formal elements of Indigenous Australian art in an attempt to synthesise a reimagined art style that was representative of the Australian nation.

Through analysis of several of Preston's works and texts, I first identify Preston's approach to developing her 'Australian' aesthetic. This establishes the 'problem': how did Preston accomplish this? What were her motives? I then address one particular manifestation of this aesthetic in Preston's *oeuvre*, namely her 'Indigenous designs'. Finally, I evaluate the success of Preston's endeavour to develop a truly national art. This forms the 'solution' to Preston's problem. Was she successful? Or does the problematic nature of her method overshadow any success that she had?

Margaret Preston's search for a national art was catalysed by her training under the Heidelberg school. Members of this school claimed they were responsible for the "Genesis"<sup>4</sup> of Australian Art. Preston recognised their history of attempts to define the Australian aesthetic, but found them unsatisfactory for her standard. Her first writings on the search for a national art emerged in 1919 on her return to Australia from seven years spent in Europe. "On my return to Australia... I saw that things had not changed... the art was all

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<sup>1</sup> Ian McLean, "The Australianness Of The English Claude: Nation And Empire In The Art Of John Glover". *Australian And New Zealand Journal Of Art* 7, 1 (2006).

<sup>2</sup> McLean, "Nation and Empire".

<sup>3</sup> Roger Butler, *The Prints Of Margaret Preston*. Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Mclean, "Nation and Empire", 127.

imitative... none of the work had any of the fundamental characteristics... of Australia".<sup>5</sup> Her instruction at the National Gallery School of Art from Frederick McCubbin may also have influenced this desire.<sup>6</sup> Preston recognised the attempts of McCubbin's Heidelberg School, Tom Roberts in particular, in almost getting close to developing a national image.<sup>7</sup> However, she did not agree with the method in which they did it. Preston viewed the Impressionists' reliance on light as unreliable, due to light's "fugitive"<sup>8</sup> nature. Rather, Preston called for a national art that prioritised subject matter and colour over light or other elements.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly also central to Preston's manifesto was the use of applied art to convey the national aesthetic. "Australia is crying out for a national culture, and it is only with the closest bond between artist and the people that there can be a national art and culture".<sup>10</sup> Thus, Preston argued against solely relying on high art as the Impressionists did, rather encouraging interior design and homewares in her new aesthetic as integral to its success.<sup>11</sup>

Preston's aesthetic had two defining and distinct influences: Indigenous Australian art and the Modernist movement, in turn heavily inspired by Japanese art.

Central to Preston's Australian subject matter were the motifs, colours and designs of Indigenous Australian art. Through the study of Indigenous applied art in the collection of the AGNSW, Preston developed a theory that there were several basic shapes and colours that were native to Australian art. These were the circles and crescents of Indigenous art in addition to the "gumleaf shape of a sharp triangle",<sup>12</sup> as well as the colours red, yellow and ochre.<sup>13</sup> Blue was also permitted by Preston due to its depth and contrast value, despite not appearing in Indigenous art.<sup>14</sup> Preston especially valued the abstract designs of shields, and amassed a collection of images of these from all over Australia.

Margaret Preston's exposure to Modernism and Japanese art in Europe also influenced her development of her national art. While in London, Preston took significant inspiration from the artists of the Omega Workshops, the brainchild of critic and painter

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Preston. "Australian Artists Speak". Transcript of Radio Interview. Canberra, 1947. NGA Archives, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, *Margaret Preston*, 2

<sup>7</sup> Preston, "Australian Artists Speak", 3.

<sup>8</sup> Preston, "Australian Artists Speak", 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Preston, "Australian Artists Speak", 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Preston, "American Art Under The New Deal: Murals". *Art In Australia* 3, no. 69 (1937). 54.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Margaret Preston*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Preston, "The Indigenous Art Of Australia". *Art In Australia* 3, no. 11 (1925): 45.

<sup>13</sup> Preston, "The Indigenous Art of Australia", 49.

<sup>14</sup> Preston, "The Indigenous Art of Australia", 52.

Roger Fry. Fry had coordinated exhibitions of the French post-impressionists, including one featuring works by Picasso, Matisse and Cezanne in 1910.<sup>15</sup> Both the English and French post-impressionists took significant inspiration from Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock printing, a style that almost single handedly shaped Margaret Preston's distinctive aesthetic.<sup>16</sup> The flat, bold colours, geometric subjects and general lack of realism can all be identified in Preston's work as emerging from a combination of Modernism and Japanese art.<sup>17</sup>

The clearest manifestation of Preston's national art is in her 'Aboriginal designs'. These designs, touched upon in the previous paragraph, are direct appropriations of those found on Indigenous shields and other objects. Almost always woodblock prints, this style of her work is bold and brightly coloured. Preston first advocated for the popular acceptance of her Indigenous designs in *Art in Australia* in 1925, in which she shared some designs that she had derived primarily from Indigenous shields. These designs are bold and striking, adhering to Preston's accepted palette of yellow, blue, red, ochre and black. Preston argued that these works were not high art, but merely suggestions for home decorators to incorporate into their homes.<sup>18</sup> Suggesting the designs' application to coverlets, handkerchiefs, rugs and cushions, Preston acceded that the colours may be changed, so long as they remained "dense".<sup>19</sup> It is the density of the colours and the clearly defined, geometric shapes of the work that stands out from a formalist perspective. Figure X shows Preston's design for a rug or chair cover, adapted from a Pikan shield from the Russell River region in Northern Queensland.<sup>20</sup> Its highly abstracted, boldly coloured nature was what Preston believed would be the most effective in planting the seed that would develop into a national aesthetic.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rose Peel, "Margaret Preston: A Material Girl Explained". In *AICCM Symposium 2006*. Wellington, NZ: AICCM, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Peel, "Margaret Preston".

<sup>17</sup> Peel, "Margaret Preston".

<sup>18</sup> Preston, "Indigenous Art of Australia".

<sup>19</sup> Preston, "Indigenous Art of Australia", 52.

<sup>20</sup> Preston, "Indigenous Art of Australia".

<sup>21</sup> Preston, "Indigenous Art of Australia".



Figure 1. (Left) Margaret Preston, Pikan Shield Design, 1925, woodcut, in *Art In Australia* 3, no. 11 (1925): 44.

Figure 2. (Right) Margaret Preston, Shields from Northern Queensland, 1930, photograph, in *Art In Australia* 3, no. 31 (1930): 55.

Preston's second article on the use of Indigenous designs in art was published in *Art in Australia* in 1930. In this article Preston demonstrates her method of derivation, publishing the original source material as well as her pattern. Like the original article, she advocates for her patterns' use as homewares, suggesting the pattern of the shields depicted in figure 2 for rugs and an engraved glass. In this article, Preston argues not so much for copying her designs, but rather the reader creating designs of their own from the Indigenous inspiration she provides. "As an experiment, take the outside shape and cover it with the same idea but different shapes".<sup>22</sup> In this sentence Preston refers to the shields in figure 2, encouraging the adaptation and exploration of the pictured designs to suit the reader. As in the 1925 article, Preston stresses the vital importance of abstractism to the visual effect of the works. Preston writes "Please do not forget: no realistic designs on utilitarian objects. Be aboriginal."<sup>23</sup> In this almost Corbusian form-over-function modernist approach, the artist cements the lessons she had learned in Europe. This attempt to promulgate the designs of Indigenous Australians was not initially successful.<sup>24</sup> However,

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Preston, "The Application Of Aboriginal Designs". *Art In Australia* 3, no. 31 (1930): 50.

<sup>23</sup> Preston, "Application Of Aboriginal Designs", 52.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Margaret Preston*, 43.

they eventually caught on. A description of the proceedings of the NSW Arts and Crafts Society's annual show of 1936 reported on "the excellent effects gained by the adaptation of aboriginal art to modern design, which was advocated by Margaret Preston a few years ago."<sup>25</sup> Preston continued to print Indigenous designs right up until her death in 1963: later examples show an evolution of style, blending her preferred floral motifs (such as the Banksia portrayed in Figure 3), with the Indigenous patterns and colours she so admired.

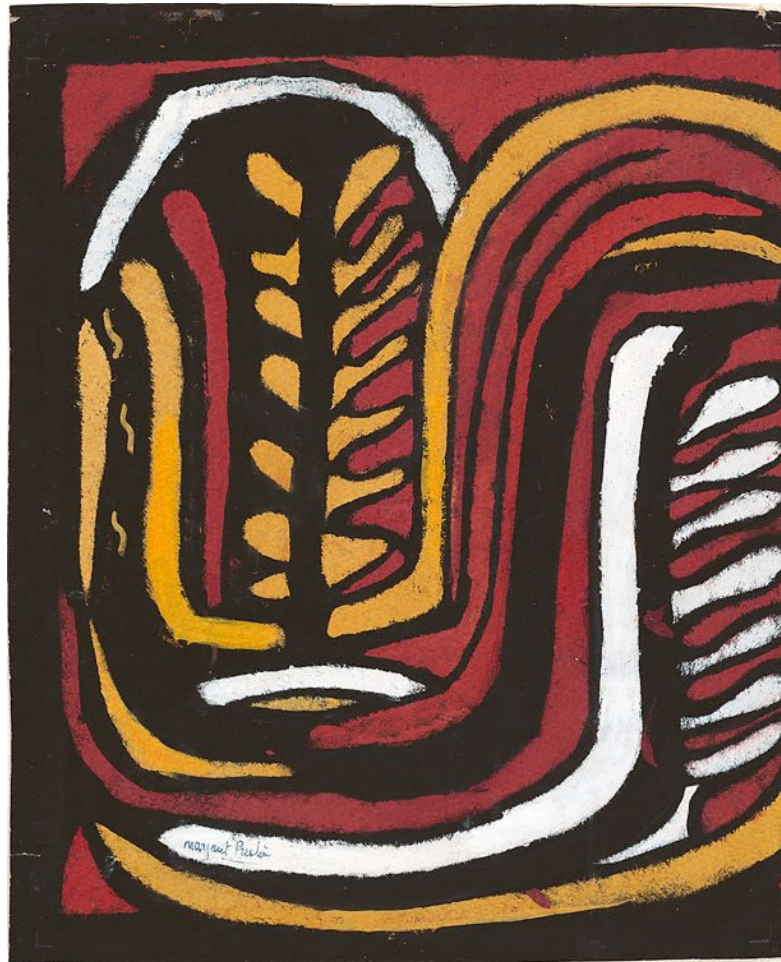


Figure 3. Margaret Preston, *Aboriginal Glyph*, 1958, stencil print, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

While Preston's Indigenous designs may have been successful in gaining public recognition, their legacy as colonial products must be questioned to fully evaluate their true success. Preston's record on the matter of appropriation is not incredibly sensitive to, or even aware of the issues of Indigenous Australians. Art occupies a complex position in Indigenous Australian societies, mediating between the ancestral past and the present in a

<sup>25</sup> William Moore quoted in Butler, *Margaret Preston*, 44.

way with no clear western equivalent.<sup>26</sup> Art production is heavily restricted by traditional law, with artists only being able to reproduce designs to which they have an inherited right.<sup>27</sup> This establishes a clear fault in Preston's appropriation. On using Indigenous designs in art, Preston wrote "please do not bother about what the carver meant in the way of myths, rites etc.; that is not the decorator's affair".<sup>28</sup> While Preston may have had a benevolent or otherwise good intent, this casual appropriation of sacred designs has serious consequences. Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins describes Preston's appropriation as being "like speaking in a French accent without speaking French. The accent is there, the intonation is there, but the meaning is not."<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, in the year 2022, in which the Indigenous art market is worth a quarter of a billion dollars,<sup>30</sup> the ethics of settlers effectively stealing money from Indigenous Australians comes into serious question. Two in three Indigenous-style artworks purchased in Australia are fake,<sup>31</sup> a trend that has directly emerged out of the commercialisation and commodification of Indigenous Art that began in the 1940s. Whether Preston can be credited fully for this phenomenon is a different question, however there is no denying the role she played. Dr. B Marika, a Yolngu artist from Arnhem land, explains that "Our art is our resource, it belongs to us, we use it in a ceremonial context; it is a resource for our survival. If control of that resource is taken away from us, we cannot meet our cultural obligations; we cannot use it for our families' benefit".<sup>32</sup> Preston's national art does just this: she takes away the designs and profits from Indigenous people and places it in the hands of settlers.

However, Preston's actions were not all problematic: through her membership of the Anthropological Society of NSW she was exposed to a wider variety of Indigenous culture, including a trip to the Northern Territory at 72 years of age.<sup>33</sup> After this exposure, Preston's writings on Indigenous artists changed.

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<sup>26</sup> Howard Morphy et al., "Aboriginal Australia", *Oxford Art Online*, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Morphy et al., "Aboriginal Australia"

<sup>28</sup> Preston, "Indigenous Art of Australia".

<sup>29</sup> Hetti Perkins quoted in Angela Goddard, "Tony Albert: Conversations With Margaret Preston". *Sullivan+Strumpf Magazine*, 2021. [https://issuu.com/sullivanstrumpf/docs/marapr\\_2021](https://issuu.com/sullivanstrumpf/docs/marapr_2021).

<sup>30</sup> Romlie Mokak, Lisa Gropp, and Joanne Chong, "Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts And Crafts". Canberra: Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Mokak, Gropp and Chong, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Dr. B Marika quoted in Sally Butler, "'Art for a New Understanding': An Interview with Valerie Keenan, Manager of Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre" *Arts* 8, no. 3 (2019): 91. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8030091>

<sup>33</sup> Butler *Margaret Preston*, 45.

“[the Indigenous Australian] is a true and sensitive artist whose work should be studied and treated with the respect that is due to true art... the art of the aborigine has for too long been neglected. The attention of the Australian people must be drawn to the fact that it is a great art and the foundation of a national culture for this country.”<sup>34</sup>

Still drawn back to the ideal of a National Art, Preston demonstrates a much deeper understanding of Indigenous art in this paragraph. There is no denying that Preston championed Indigenous art at a time when it was seen as only of anthropological interest.<sup>35</sup> However it is irrefutable that Preston’s designs are those of an oppressed group that have been forcibly co-opted by a settler artist, with no consultation or interaction with the original culture. This, perhaps unwittingly, serves as an excellent analogy for Australia as a nation— a land co-opted by settlers with a complete lack of respect for its original inhabitants.

Thus, it is clear that Margaret Preston appropriated visual motifs and other formal elements of Indigenous Australian art in an attempt to synthesise a reimagined, truly Australian aesthetic. Preston’s search for a national art, while problematic, is a fascinating exploration into the complexities of relationships between colonial culture and that of the colonised. Preston’s basis for her national art was rooted in primitivism, orientalism and the fetishisation of a “simple” culture, and ought not be considered representative of what a national art should be. However, the nature of her work almost mirrors the nature of Australia’s being: a nation built upon the oppression of Indigenous people and an art that does the same to suit that nation. Thus, from a post-colonial perspective, Preston’s work can be considered a successful representation of the values and features of Colonial Australia, and therefore a successful national art, for that period at least.

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<sup>34</sup> Preston, Margaret. “Paintings in Arnhem Land”, *Art in Australia* 3, no. 81 (1940). 62-3.

<sup>35</sup> Butler *Margaret Preston*, 45.

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## Figures



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