

REFLECTION



## Unveiling the Mary Macha Archives

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### ABSTRACT

Perth-based art dealer Mary Macha was engaged with Indigenous art for almost fifty years. She played a critical role in the development of Aboriginal art in Western Australia firstly in the government sector and subsequently as a private dealer. Her clients included Alistair McAlpine (Lord McAlpine) and Robert Holmes a Court. She was the key player in the development of what became known as the East Kimberley School of art and formed a close relationship with the key artists, Paddy Jamanji and Rover Thomas. After her death in 2017, her archive was sorted and collated by her executors with assistance from the University of Melbourne and vested with the Batty Library in Perth.

### KEYWORDS

Mary Macha; archives; record descriptions; authenticity; art dealer; art centres

In 2017 Mary Macha (1923–2017) died in Perth at the age of 94, at the end of a nearly 50-year engagement with Australian Indigenous art. Her career began working for the Natives Trading Fund set up by Frank Gare, the last Commissioner for Native Welfare (1962–79) in Western Australia (WA). Gare visited Warburton Range Mission and found that the mission was encouraging the manufacture of Aboriginal artefacts and weapons ‘for trade’ and marketing them through its own cumbersome organisation. He decided the system needed changing and was instrumental in establishing The Natives Trading Fund under the *1963 Native Welfare Act*.<sup>1</sup>

In January 1971 Mary Macha became the first Project Officer for the Natives Trading Fund, where she was assisted by various Nyoongar women, including Shirley Corunna and later Dorothy Bynder and Roma Winmar. They were in charge of a warehouse in East Perth, where all the artefacts collected from all over the vast state of WA were sent for invoicing, pricing and distribution to the few retailers interested in stocking them. As Macha described it:

Our responsibility was the marketing of all Aboriginal traditional, innovative and introduced art works sent to the outlet ...<sup>2</sup>

Soon after amongst those dusty boxes of clattering artefacts, Macha had her epiphany when she picked up and took in an exquisitely formed woomera. Writing to the eminent anthropologist Ronald Berndt in 1988, she recalled:

... the first time I went into the old Native Trading Fund Rooms in Wallington street. I saw a Western Desert spear and spear thrower lying on the floor. The communication was instant and inspiring.<sup>3</sup>

Mary had grown up during the Depression in Perth and Kalgoorlie, in an upper middle-class family. During the war she trained as a nurse, however it was marriage in 1947 to Czech émigré refugee and Bauhaus-trained graphic designer Vaclav Macha that opened her eyes to modern art and design. In the mid-1960s she resumed nursing but by 1970 Macha was ready for a change when she saw an advertisement for a job with the Western Australian Native Welfare branch as a project officer managing their warehouse.

My aim from then on was to create a marketing outlet that would give artists the opportunity of maintaining and developing the artistic expression of their culture.<sup>4</sup>

The Natives Trading Fund collected work from Nyoongars around Perth, carved emu eggs, Western-style landscape paintings in watercolour and oil, and paperbark collages of landscape and animals. These modest works were the mainstay of the business cashflow. She also received work from mission stations at Warburton, Cundalee, La Grange, One Arm Point, Looma and Broome, in particular the drawings of 'Butcher' Joe Nangan, as well as from the Kimberley through the auspices of Native Welfare offices in Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Wyndham and Derby:

Emphasis was placed on encouraging the preservation and maintenance of Aboriginal material culture. While at the same time supporting the emerging innovative art and craft. Because of the use of traditional resources in the first instance it was a natural consequence that traditional materials were used when working on innovative works.<sup>5</sup>

Macha was also able to travel into the field regularly. In between her twice-yearly trips, artefacts were collected by others working permanently in the area, including anthropologist Kim Akerman, who recalled:

In the Kimberley I was one of a handful of people, from Welfare, Social Services, the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA) and the Education Departments, who provided Mary with assistance in getting stock to her and whenever she visited the region, finding ways to take her out to the various communities, to meet up with artists whose work she so admired.<sup>6</sup>

Macha's response was always to the art, not the story, and she stressed that she did not have a good visual memory but that she had strong emotional responses to what she saw and it must have been the emotion evoked and provoked that stayed with her. In 1974, after the creation of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, the Natives Trading Fund was subsumed by Aboriginal Arts Australia. Based in Perth, Macha became the Manager of Aboriginal Traditional Arts and she was bold and visionary, unlike many of her contemporaries in the fledgling government-directed apparatus marketing Aboriginal art. Although she had no formal artistic training, Mary Macha had an exceptional eye, an acute visual sensibility and a feeling for the essential lines of things made for use, used and re-used.

Over the next decade she honed that eye and when she first saw the dusty, ochre-painted dance boards made for the performance of the Gurirr Gurirr in 1981 she had the eyes to see and value them. She was not beset with doubts about whether she was

collecting artefacts, tourist art or high art, she immediately recognised the innovation and significance of the East Kimberley work. She had been collecting artefacts, mostly boomerangs and small wooden carvings, from the Warmun community at Turkey Creek in the East Kimberley, but these new works were unprecedented.

Her first sales of the Krill Krill or Gurirr Gurirr boards were to the British collector, businessman and politician Robert Alistair McAlpine (1942–2014)<sup>7</sup> and the Berndt Museum of Anthropology at the University of Western Australia (UWA) in 1982. According to Kim Akerman, neither the Western Australian Museum (WAM) nor the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) were interested in buying a set, the latter regarding them not as art but anthropology and so beneath their purview.<sup>8</sup> For the Berndt Museum the issue of whether they were artefacts or art was not important. They were examples of innovation within material culture that fitted within the stream of objects that Ronald and Catherine Berndt had already sought out and collected from the wider region.

In the early 1980s there were no art centres representing any of these artists and very few dealers were interested in promoting and marketing their work, and Macha was operating in a hostile bureaucratic environment. There was a prevailing view that Aboriginal art was confined to barks from Arnhem Land and acrylic dot paintings from the Western Desert. By 1983 Macha was championing the work of the East Kimberley artists including Rover Thomas, who had just begun to paint. She was effectively the first art advisor in the Kimberley. She left the government agency after working with them for 12 years, and went out on her own. Her alliance with Lord McAlpine was crucial. He was a prolific and adventurous collector so when he employed her as his consultant on Aboriginal art, she was able to set up as an independent agent and dealer representing the particular artists she championed – Joe Nangan from Broome, the Mowanjum Wanjina artists – David Mowarjarli, Alec Mingelmanganu, Manila Kutwit, Lily Karadada –, the Bardi artists from One Arm Point, and Paddy Jamanji and Rover Thomas from Warmun community (also known as Turkey Creek), where the Gurirr Gurirr had originated.

Simultaneously, Mary Macha became the curator of the burgeoning McAlpine Aboriginal Art Collection, an art dealer and Rover Thomas's de facto manager. From the outset Macha worked closely with the UWA Anthropology Department and the Berndt Museum and Patricia Vinnicombe from the WAM, who documented the works she dealt with, photographing paintings and objects and recording artists' stories. So although Macha herself had no academic or anthropological expertise the works were properly recorded. Combined with her nursing training in accurate recordkeeping, Macha set up an accounting and inventory system which contributed to the depth of the archives she maintained and left.

Once established on her own, running the business from the garage and office of her suburban house in Subiaco, Macha quickly found and cultivated the right clients for the work including Robert and Janet Holmes à Court. To count amongst your best clients for Aboriginal art both Lord McAlpine and the Holmes à Courts was a local coup. Internationally, Macha dealt with the Dutch collector Thomas Vroom of the Amsterdam gallery Songlines. They were among the most influential collectors of the 1980s, and many have argued their support and purchasing clout kept the Aboriginal art market going and allowed for it to properly develop into what anthropologist Fred

Myers called a 'high art'.<sup>9</sup> Lord McAlpine stressed he was confident she was treating artists she dealt with properly:

One of the most unusual aspects of Mary's character was the way that she was determined to maintain equity between the artist and the collector; she had a determination to see that the deal she had orchestrated was fair to both sides.<sup>10</sup>

They also knew they were getting the best work, as Janet Holmes à Court said:

Most of Rover's work came through Mary Macha – she really discovered Rover, and she drew him to my attention. Robert and I thought they were fabulous paintings and we started collecting them ... I think Mary's got a great eye and she could sort the wheat from the chaff.<sup>11</sup>

Lord McAlpine regarded Mary Macha as his 'guiding light in all matters Aboriginal'.<sup>12</sup> He valued her honesty and her 'selective approach to arts and artefacts'.<sup>13</sup> He developed great respect for Macha:

Her enthusiasm was infectious, her knowledge considerable and quite apart from these qualities, she saw the need for Aboriginal artists to record their cultures. In the goods that she dealt in, Mary always maintained a strictly observed level of quality ... It was through her that I obtained the most interesting pieces in my collection ...<sup>14</sup>

On the matter of 'observed level of quality', Macha was unhesitating in her rejection of any work she did not consider the best examples of the artist's work. Numerous Rover Thomas works were gifted to the Berndt Museum because she regarded them 'unsuitable for sale' and they went with the explicit proviso that they were for 'study purposes only' and 'not to be exhibited'. Similarly Kim Akerman saw books of Joe Nangan sketches 'boldly inscribed NOT FOR SALE!!'<sup>15</sup>

Mary Macha's strategic placement of Rover Thomas's works with private collectors, public institutions and state galleries was matched by the relationships she developed with key curators in these organisations. As well as placing a set of Krill Krill or Gurirr Gurirr boards with the Berndt Museum, Mary Macha formed good working relationships with the Berndts, Ronald and Catherine, whom she regarded as friends, and their new young Director, Dr John Stanton. Mary Macha sold Rover Thomas's and Paddy Jaminji's work in 1984 to the Australian National Gallery in Canberra after showing photographs of their work to the inaugural director, James Mollison. Mollison did not hesitate either. He introduced Mary Macha to his newly appointed curator, a young Wallace Caruana, and a commission was arranged. The commission resulted in the first Rover Thomas works entering a public collection barely a year after he began painting. When Mollison left Canberra and went to the National Gallery of Victoria, he introduced Macha to Judith Ryan, Curator of Aboriginal Art. Macha was a brilliant networker who formed strategic relationships with collectors and institutions and ultimately with the auction house Sotheby's, which developed the secondary market for Aboriginal art.

She was vigilant in monitoring an artist's reputation and was proactive in maintaining authenticity in their oeuvre long after she ceased dealing in their work. In relation to Rover Thomas she publicly identified, without hesitation, problematic works whenever they appeared on the secondary market in galleries and at auction. While Rover Thomas was alive and forgeries had begun to appear, she campaigned to get him to visit

the galleries on the east coast of Australia selling the work and attempted to have him verify his work. In the course of these activities she assembled a large file of images of these works and boldly labelled the file 'FAKES'. In sorting out her archive with Kim Akerman we were faced with the problem of what to do with this file of highly problematic works purported to be by Rover Thomas, Paddy Jamanji and others. It was a significant element of her practice as a dealer and as a reputable and trusted authenticator of East Kimberley work. We decided it needed further labelling to ensure that the presence of any of these images in her archive could never be construed as indicating she endorsed them or accepted their veracity.

As well as championing innovative art like Rover Thomas and Paddy Jamanji; the emergent brightly coloured acrylic art from Balgo; the move of the Wandjina painters of Kalumburu from working exclusively on bark to canvas supports; the carved heads from La Grange made by Big John Dodo and others, Macha valued traditional material culture and ensured that by commissioning works for public institutions or private collectors, art practices and traditional skills were not lost but instead maintained and developed. *Kalwa* double rafts made by the Bardi people of One Arm Point on the Dampier Peninsula were commissioned from the best makers including Tommy Thomas and placed by Macha in maritime museums and collections in Australia and internationally. At the same time, she encouraged the innovative thread-cross sculptural forms, *Ilma* made from wood, string and wool by Roy Wiggan from the Dampier Peninsula. McAlpine purchased a large collection and they were gifted to the Australian Maritime Museum in Sydney. Until the end of her life Macha was working with Kim Akerman writing and compiling a book of the watercolours of Joe Nangan.

The work that Mary did ... the valuable contribution it made to the conservation of traditional art and in the development of modern Kimberley art. ... Her emphasis was not only on conserving traditional art and craft but also encouraging artists to experiment with different mediums that could reach a wider market.<sup>16</sup>

After Macha's death in 2017, her executors decided to vest her archive with the Battye Library at the State Library of Western Australia. To that end it was transported to Hobart to her colleague Kim Akerman, who sorted, collated and sleeved it with the assistance of the University of Melbourne. I worked on the East Kimberley material and Dr Lyndon Ormond-Parker on the media files and audio recordings.

The Mary Macha Archives comprise documents and multimedia material currently housed in four large plastic crates – each equivalent to two milk crates.

**A. Documents** – paper files in plastic sleeves organised by topic in Lever Arch Springlock folders.

**Crate 1** East Kimberley – 9 large folders, Rover Thomas (8) and Paddy Jamanji (1). Painting certificates, correspondence with the artists and others including various intermediaries in the Warmun community. Some related photographs, clippings, catalogues, invitations and ephemera.

Extensive correspondence relating to the commissioning, wording, translation, selection and transport of stone for the execution of Rover Thomas's headstone at Warmun cemetery.

**Crate 2** Other artists – 9 large folders. Artists: Butcher Joe Nangan, Roy Wiggan, Alec Mingelmanganu, various Kalumburu, Bardi, Broome and Balgo artists, painting certificates, correspondence with the artists and others, some related photographs, clippings, catalogues, invitations and ephemera.

Correspondence with institutions: WAM, AGWA, Maritime Museum, Art Gallery of South Australia, Queensland Art Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria and the Berndt Museum.

Correspondence relating to copyrights and valuations.

**Crate 3** Business records of Mary Macha's business (1983–2017) as a private dealer. Correspondence with major clients: Australian City Properties (McAlpine file) and the National Gallery of Australia.

Documentation and correspondence relating to the numerous carved stoneheads by the La Grange/Bidjajanga artists is prolific.

Records – Invoices, Debtors.

Some of these records are restricted because of privacy and commercial in confidence matters.

## B. Multimedia

**Crate 4** Reel-to-reel tapes, compact discs, 50 cassette tapes and 50 compact discs.

The cassette tapes comprise the oral documentation of many paintings through stories about them, recorded by Kim Akerman with the artists. Akerman has digitised the majority of them.

Photographs and slides including Richard Woldendorp's photographs and slides.

As no records were kept at the time, Kim Akerman had to identify people and locations in order to caption these photographs.

Mary was neither a good nor an assiduous photographer, so the photographs she took herself are of variable quality and limited value. However, she employed renowned WA documentary and landscape photographer Richard Woldendorp to take photographs and slides of particular events. For instance, Woldendorp fully documented the workshop she organised in 1979 with her husband, Vaclav Macha, at Kalumburu to introduce canvas painting.

Macha's archives are not vast but they are substantial and significant. They suffer to some extent from the fact that they remained a working archive for so long, until the end of her life, which meant that files were sometimes pulled apart to answer a research question or satisfy her own need to check on something and afterwards they were not always refiled accurately but rather ended up in the miscellaneous category. As these records had been pulled apart by the creator of the archive at various times, it became more important from our perspective to restore material to its original category. We felt that retaining the order in which it was left was of marginal value for researchers.

Macha's correspondence with the artists she represented and worked with will be of great interest to researchers. It captures the beginnings of the Aboriginal art industry at the time when marketing and promotion of Aboriginal art happened because of carefully cultivated personal relationships, often necessarily conducted through well-chosen intermediaries. Her personal letters to individual artists are particularly rich and there is a heritage dimension to some of this material.

## Notes

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3. Mary Macha, 'Letter to Ronald Berndt Thanking Him for His Dedication to Her in a Catalogue', 1988, Mary Macha Archives.
4. Macha, 'Letter'.
5. Mary Macha, 'Materials Used by Aboriginal Artists for Painting Surfaces or Images on Works for Commercial Purposes', unpublished manuscript, 1992, Mary Macha Archives.
6. Kim Akerman, 'Eulogy for Mary Macha', unpublished manuscript, 2017, Mary Macha Archives.
7. Later Lord McAlpine when he was created a life peer in 1984.
8. Kim Akerman 'Eulogy for March Macha', unpublished manuscript, 2017, Mary Macha Archives.
9. Fred Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2002.
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11. Janet Holmes à Court and Terri-Ann White (eds.), *Muse: A Journey Through an Art Collection*, UWA Publishing, Perth, WA, 2017, p. 220.
12. McAlpine, pp. 211–12.
13. McAlpine, pp. 211–12.
14. McAlpine, pp. 211–12.
15. Akerman.
16. Steve Edwards, *Artists and Artefacts – Halls Creek 1977–1980*, unpublished manuscript, c.1992, Mary Macha Archives.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Suzanne Spunner*, is an Honorary Fellow in Indigenous Studies, at the University of Melbourne. She is a playwright and writer on Indigenous art and theatre. Her PhD was about issues in the oeuvre of Rover Thomas. She had completed a book about him, *All-About Rover Thomas*.