

CHALLENGES TO AUTHENTICITY IN THE ABORIGINAL ART MARKET

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Over the past two or three years the Aboriginal art market has been the subject of considerable media attention which has raised questions about the authenticity of Aboriginal art. Such challenges are of significant concern for a number of reasons. First, they challenge the integrity of Aboriginal artists and others involved in the Aboriginal art market. Second, they threaten a significant source of economic resources for many Aboriginal communities. And third, they threaten the Australian international art market of which Aboriginal art forms a significant component.

However, several of the questions that have been raised in relation to Aboriginal art in Australia have in fact bedevilled philosophers and art historians about art more generally for centuries. At the same time, Aboriginal art does presents us with some further complexing issues.

Today I want to begin this session by outlining some of the different ways we might think about the authenticity question. In raising these issues I am drawing upon the research Ken Polk and I have carried out over past 2 years, and in particular in the first half of this year. We are very grateful to the many art gallery owners, art centre co-ordinators and may other interested parties who talked and spent time with us. There are too many to list individually here, but we will be acknowledging them all for their invaluable contribution to this research when we publish a more detailed report of our overall findings.

When a buyer is about to buy a piece of Aboriginal art there are probably two general questions in relation to authenticity about which they might be concerned. The first is the general question that would be an issue for the purchaser of any form of fine art, that is, whether or not the named artist is responsible for the work? The second question relates more to the purchase of a piece of Aboriginal art, and that is whether or not the piece is an authentic *Aboriginal* product? Both of these questions however present us with further dilemmas that we now want to examine in a little more detail.

Is the named artist *responsible* for the work?

There are three situations that have led to questions of authenticity in relation to this issue. None of these are peculiar to Aboriginal art. The first situation is one in which the named artist had nothing to do with the production of the piece. This is the classic “fake” situation and there have been many famous international examples of this as in the case of the fraudster John Drewe who earlier this year was sentenced to a term in prison for introducing some 200 faked works onto the British art market over recent years.

In the Aboriginal art market in the past two years has seen allegations of comparable faking, where it has been claimed in newspaper accounts that works by such well known artists as Clifford Possum were produced by fakers hoping the cash in on the established reputations of such artists.

The second situation is one in which the artist signs works in fact produced by others. Historically, there is nothing particular new in this practice either. Paul Rubens, among others, was well known to have sold works to clients which were produced out of his studio with perhaps little or none of the work actually being done by Rubens.

In the Australian Aboriginal art market, there have been media allegations (which are contested) about works sold with Turkey Tolson's signature, where, as in the case of Rubens, it is alleged that the work was produced by others and afterwards signed by Tolson.

Questions have been raised with us about this issue in relation to other Aboriginal artists. Most often the situation is one in which the artist signs work produced by other family members.

It is here that we begin to come up against a fundamental dilemma, or conflict, that arises when Aboriginal understandings of their work is placed in the context of the expectations of the white art market. For example, put simply, from an Aboriginal perspective, if the artist approves of a family member painting a work that draws upon the artist's form/style, or use of motifs, or storyline, the product may still be conceived of as the artist's *responsibility*. This issue of the cultural context of the art production is also raised in relation to the following situation.

The third situation arises when a single artist's signature appears on a piece on which others have also worked. This is potentially a much more widespread issue. It often relates to the sheer magnitude of the production of the work. For example, in the case of a large dot painting, or a large work involving extensive cross-hatching, others may participate in the production of the work. In other cases an older artists whose eyesight is deteriorating maybe assisted by a close relative.

This became a significant public issue in the Aboriginal art industry with the work Kathleen Petyarre. Petyarre was awarded a major art prize, but subsequently her defacto spouse, and an art gallery dealer, claimed that he had participated in their production and that they were in fact joint works. After subsequent research, and investigative committee decided that the award could justifiably be made to Petyarre. Their investigation included a close analysis of her previous works and they in essence concluded that the painting was recognisably a development of her earlier work, with a recognisable style and use of motifs and story. A key issue is who conceived of the work, and in Aboriginal culture, who owns the story and was responsible for the thrust of the painting.

Again this is not a problem peculiar to Aboriginal artists, both significant contemporary artists and historically, artists producing exceptionally large works have employed others to participate in the production of the final product.

Nevertheless, as a consequence of the publicity surrounding this issue, most art dealers who worked directly with artists indicated they strongly discouraged more than one artist working on a single piece of work. Art centre co-ordinators took different positions in relation to this issue, but in general the position taken was that if they felt that the work was in fact a collaborative effort they would put both names on the work. If the work was however clearly the idea, the story, the work of a particular artist who had simply been assisted by another person, then the work have a single name on it.

Since working on art together is a way of younger artists learning the stories and the skills, then one dealer we talked to in our research suggested that collaborative works ought to be encouraged rather than discouraged. Attributing the work both to the senior and the junior artist would also be a way of the young artist beginning to establish their own career.

The issue is the consequent retail price of the work. Most people felt that with two names the work was worth less. However one co-ordinator suggested if both of the artists had reputations of their own, then the work may in fact be worth more. Some co-ordinators suggested that collaborative work was not as widespread as thought because the artists had to share the income from any product that was produced jointly. The other side of the coin is that by working with others, more works could be produced more quickly, and the work of a relative may be worth more if a known artist was credited with the work.

Art centre co-ordinators felt that their situation meant that they became so familiar with the style and story of individual artists that they could tell when more than one hand had been involved and that they would raise this with the artist to clarify the situation. Thus far there has been no question of a “fake” or “fraud” in relation to this issue emerging from art sold through art centres.

While the issue of people other than the named artist participating in the production of a piece of art is not peculiar to Aboriginal art, the situation does present some particular dilemmas in the Aboriginal art area. First the occurrence of some of these practices have to be considered in the context of the extreme disparity between the rich and the poor in Australian society, and the fact that Aboriginals are the most economically disadvantaged population. For some Aboriginal communities art is a significant source of economic support. Another significant feature of the context, which is relevant to our understanding of the potential for these practices to occur, is the cultural understandings of individual responsibility in relation to the community.

Another significant contextual issues relates to the cultural expectation in some communities that some art be produced by more than a single artist. This may relate, for example, to the passing on of knowledge or to the expectation of the involvement of more than one family grouping in the representation of some aspects of the dreaming. These cultural values may clash with those of a white art market that wants to see a work identified as that of a single artist. This expectation however, maybe inconsistent in some instances with Aboriginal cultural expectations, and therefore a contradiction arises between expecting both that a work be that of a single artist and that the work is “authentically” Aboriginal. This leads us to the second set of “authenticity” dilemmas that arise in relation to Aboriginal art.

Is the piece of art an *authentic Aboriginal product*?

For some consumers, and others in the art market, the authenticity of Aboriginal art has become associated with whether or not “a story”, most often related to the dreaming, is associated with the particular piece. The problem is of course that not all art produced by Aboriginal people has the same relationship to a “story”, for example, some work relates to body markings or depictions of country. There is now a wide range of different forms of Aboriginal art with different relationships to “traditional” culture that make this expectation of a “story” not always appropriate.

However, even in those forms of Aboriginal art that traditionally have been more associated with the relating of a story, the expectation that “the story” of the painting will be relayed to the consumer presents its own problems. In his account of the art of an Arnhemland community, Morphy indicates that the relating of a story from the work was considered important by the artists as part of a process of informing the consumers of Aboriginal culture. However, he also details the layering of meanings/stories in some forms of Aboriginal art that

introduces a complexity to the appropriate “story” to be related to the public in relation to a particular work of art. Morphy also anticipates a problem that we saw evidence of, and that is the supplying of stories for small pieces by a gallery owner.

A second proposed criteria for establishing that the work is authentically Aboriginal, is that the artist is Aboriginal. But again this criterion presents a number of dilemmas. In the fine art market, the situation that the consumer is concerned to protect themselves against is perhaps best captured in the Elizabeth Durack situation (a white woman who painted under an assumed male name in a style understood by some as Aboriginal). The issue is probably of more extensive concern in the tourist art market. Is a didgeridoo that is mass produced by white folks, but painted by Aboriginal people, an authentic Aboriginal product? There are many woodcarvings in tourist shops that have been produced in Asia and then painted in Australia by Aboriginal people, and perhaps some non-Aboriginal people.

The use of this criterion also raises a number of ethical questions. It is also potentially very demeaning for Aboriginal artists to have to establish their Aboriginality. Should Jimmy Pike have to establish his Aboriginality in order for this work to be authenticated as “Aboriginal”? To require Aboriginal people to establish their Aboriginal heritage is particularly problematic in the context of a history in which there was extensive rape of Aboriginal women by white men. The process by which the authenticity of Aboriginal art is established on the basis of assuring the Aboriginality of the artist has been referred to as the “dog tag” method of authentication.

A third criterion for whether or not the art work is authentically Aboriginal asks whether or not the artist is entitled, or has the authority from the relevant members of the Aboriginal community to paint in a particular style or using a particular set of motifs or icons. One museum curator referred to this as the “dot dolphin” problem. For example one gallery owner told us of the work of a young woman that was selling quite well, but an Aboriginal elder came into the gallery and indicated that she was not entitled to paint as she had. The gallery owner removed the art from sale and put the Aboriginal elder and the young woman artist in touch with each other.

This final criterion asks whether or not the work of art comes from, and is within the bounds of, traditional Aboriginal culture. This is a very complex issue that raises a number of not easily resolvable issues. Again we note that contemporary Aboriginal art takes many forms and in fact has quite diverse relationships to traditional culture. This dilemma becomes most clearest perhaps when we consider the situation of younger, urban Aboriginal artists and the dilemmas they may face in attempting to represent their Aboriginal heritage and its implications for them in modern, urban society. We face the challenge of working with Aboriginal people to ensure that we do not further destroy their heritage, at the same time that we do not become the “culturally correct” police who stymie artistic development and creativity.

For us, many of these issues came together in relation to a carving about which we were given different accounts of its authenticity. Two dealers assured us it was authentic Aboriginal art because a man who was definitely Aboriginal did it – he was a Torres Strait islander, and one dealer gave us a biographical sketch of the artist. The museum curator however, put it into the “tourist art” bracket, because while the artist was Aboriginal, the sculpture drew upon the style of the Tiwi Islanders, which he was not, and therefore it was not authentic Aboriginal art. An artist may be Aboriginal, she or he may come from a community with an authentic

history of lengthy connection with the dreamtime, but questions may still remain regarding whether the work produced by that artist is “authentic” in the sense of whether the artist is within Aboriginal culture entitled to use the themes and icons employed within the work.

Recommendations

As we lay out these dilemmas in relation to establishing the meaning of “authenticity” in relation to Aboriginal art, it becomes clear that there is not a simple solution that can be implemented. The next three speakers are going to address this in detail, but we would like to briefly make a couple of points. We would suggest that the first step is to in fact acknowledge and talk about the diversity of Aboriginal art and the complexity of the issues relating to “authenticity”. In general in relation to art crime, it is our position that the most important strategy for its prevention is an informed public. Similarly in this case, we would argue that to publicise the diversity and the complexity of the issues, is a more defensible strategy than to try to oversimplify the situation.

Our second recommendation would be to strengthen the place and role of the art centres in the Aboriginal art market. This does not solve all of the problems because not all Aboriginal art will, or should be sold, through centres (eg. the art of urban Aboriginal people). However, especially in relation to the art produced in remote Aboriginal communities, it seems to us that the art centres play a significant role as intermediaries and advocates between the local culture and knowledge, and that of the white art market. We have not had time to go into detail today, but it would appear that there are at least two aspects of the authenticity discussion that can be handled by the art centers. First they are in an excellent position to advise the Aboriginal community about the white art market - its expectations and the ramifications of certain practices, and ensuring they are fully informed in relation to the situations of exploitation that are often related to authenticity issues. At the same time, they can be a significant source of educative advice to consumers regarding the cultural foundations of the art produced by specific communities, thereby helping to create a better informed consumer in terms of their expectations.

Conclusion

The issue of authenticity is a perplexing one for art in general and becomes even more complex in relation to the Aboriginal art market. From the viewpoint of criminologists, the issue of pure fakes, where one artist knowingly and with intent copies the style or a work of an established Aboriginal artist with the intent of passing that work onto the art market as the work of the established artist, is conceptually a relatively easy problem to address since it constitutes a fairly straight-forward problem of fraud. Put another way, if we restrict our discussion to this particular arena, it might be theoretically possible to draw some neat conceptual boundaries around the problem. Unfortunately, the issue of authenticity when it comes to Aboriginal art is much more complex.

First, our understandings of the meaning of “authenticity”, and the development of policies in relation to these issues, have to be considered in the context of the circumstances and cultural heritage of Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal communities are the most economically disadvantaged in our society, and Aboriginal heritage and culture often sometimes inconsistent with the white international art market. Both of these features of Aboriginal life cannot be ignored as we struggle with these issues.

In terms of more immediate strategic directions that might be pursued specifically in relation to the art market to protect the artist and the consumer, three have been suggested to us in the course of our research. First, Aboriginal artists themselves need to understand the workings of the art market, and the expectations that the market has around concerns for authenticity. Second, art dealers, including the art centres, need to play a much more proactive role in the education of both the artists and the public around the complex and unique issues of authenticity that arise with respect to Aboriginal art. Third, the consumers themselves must become much more informed about Aboriginal art and the process involved in its creation. It is unrealistic to expect that the fine arts market in particular, will have its problems of authenticity resolved through the use of any single or simple strategy, such as one set of rules or guidelines, or a process which depends upon a label of authenticity (although there certainly may be an important place for such labels within a wide set of strategies, as we shall see later today). Informed consumers, informed dealers and art centres, and informed artists working together as issues of authenticity emerge should be able to begin to lead us along paths whereby in particular situations questions of authenticity can be raised, examined, and addressed within the complex perspectives that are an inherent feature, and part of the creative excitement, of Aboriginal art.