

IX, 2.

ABORIGINAL ART
CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Several rough drafts dealing with
carving, markings on weapons, etc.

A NEW DECORATIVE ART.

The natural peculiarities in root or stem are taken advantage of in snake fashioning. The designs represent their conception of the natural markings on the various species of snake.

In their wild state their few weapons and implements were grooved or incised with rude designs representing the totem of the maker, and everything made had its special use. The new decorative art that finds expression in snakes, iguanas, walking sticks is a modern development. These articles are made to sell to the train passengers.

Only the simplest designs are on their own native weapons and sacred objects. A native in his own wild environment makes his club, grooves it along its length and chips and etches the handle part for better purchase. His spear will have a few transverse lines and spots near the blade part, his spearthrowers may have lozenge-or other groovings representative of his group. None of their weapons or implements had other than the simplest designs made on them.

Although the illustrations show that these wild cannibal groups are capable of more elaborate carving than the poor designs on their native implements, it must be remembered that no carved ornamentation was made on any weapon or implement that did not signify utility, or totem some symbol of native use. Nothing was ever carved for pure ornamentation. The snake totem men drew their designs upon their sacred and secret totem boards and these were never seen by others than the fully initiated men of the groups. He used no shields. The carved snakes show that the native can gauge the form of snake or iguana or strong walking stick in rough root or stem.

The axe and knife and chisel of the white man have altogether supplanted the kandi (cutting flints) and bidili (native chisel) with small sharp flint fastened with spinifex or sandalwood gum to the end of a short curved or straight piece of wood.

His most important cutting weapon was the flint in his

miro or spearthrower.

He bartered for shields and certain large boomerangs and also ordinary boomerangs and had little time for artistry in any of his own weapon making.

Their clubs were always heavy fighting clubs, the handle end is grooved or cut transversely to give a firm grip. In all clubs the ends are rounded.

NEW ABORIGINAL ART

Before he came into civilisation the Central Australian aborigine knew nothing of the art of carving animals, reptiles, etc. from wood for exchange or barter, or for toys for his children, or ornaments for his ceremonial observances. His native decorative art was confined either to crude incised designs handed down from Dhugurr representing his totem on every large or small sacred totem board that held the spirit of the ancestral totem, grooved markings on club, miro, spear, those on the miro being to deflect the spear, these few transverse grooves on the spear being either marks of ownership or of kills made by the spear, the grooving on clubs for purchase by the always greasy hands of the wielder, and to ground and cave drawings and paintings of totems, snake and iguana being drawn from life, kangaroo, emu and others having symbolic marks only. Those ground drawings were outlined or filled in with down and red ochre and white pipe-clay. Colouring predominated - though a little charcoal might be inconspicuously placed somewhere - these three colours being the only pigments of the C.A. native.

They used no shields but bartered for ornamental shields with the groups north, northeast, northwest and west of them. Their boomerangs were plain and were of indifferent workmanship as their principal weapons were club and spear, but they bartered for a large boomerang called wij-wij, a shaped incised or decorated object called wij-wij, or wija-wija, or weet-weet, etc., and koordiji (northern shield), dharra (western shield) and wij-wij were used in ceremonial performances only. They knew how to make shields and wij-wij, but those they made had not the magic which the bartered objects were supposed to possess.

Older members of snake, iguana, lizard and other totems, especially the ngang-garli (sorcerers) incised their totem on small "larra" (bullroarers) and made magic death-dealing objects of these. All their marked miro might be seen by women and children, as snake and other decorations on the bodies of their men were seen during totemic and initiation

ceremonies. Women of a totem having some distinguishing mark on their bodies during the process of these ceremonies, the painted markings being made by fathers or elder brothers. No raised carvings were ever made on sacred boards or weapons and no one ever made a wooden image of any object - totem or otherwise - their nomadic lives forbade this, and no man would think of making and leaving a carved image of his totem in a deserted camp, as an enemy ngang-garli might pick up and use it against him, or the wooden totem itself might follow him and work evil on him for his desertion of it.

Hence throughout the centuries of his existence, the C.A. aborigine has never made a wooden image of any living thing. He enters civilisation and contacts with a new people of different colour and culture to his own. His first understanding wonder is the white man's tools and his manipulation of them, the axe or tomahawk (called aggada or tommi-ok), his chisels, knives and oils. When traffic in his women follows, he establishes a freemasonry at once. He watches the white man whittling with his penknife and using his other tools in their order, and he sees the finished work which may be a fancy walking stick or a beautiful fine carving of a basket of flowers from a quandong kernel or kurrajong nut or some such fancy of the white man. He learns to handle the new tools, cutting himself frequently in the first process like a boy with a new penknife. As soon as he has grasped the uses of tomahawk and chisel (his own chisel, called beedilia, was a sharp flint set with gum spinifex or sandalwood gum on a curved and grooved stick), his greatest desire is to possess these, and for them he will barter sister, mother, daughter or wife, or anything the white man fancies.

Probably the first objects he made with axe and chisel were walking sticks and if his white teacher had developed the art of carving snakes and other creatures on walking sticks, these were imitated and often surpassed by the pupil, and so began a new art for the aborigine.

In 1920, a group of some thirty men, women and children, came into civilisation through the Colde water "gate".

Amongst them was a family group of left-handed men and boys. They came from the central and border areas, and were met on arrival by some civilised relations from the same areas, who had been taught wood carving, etc., at the German Mission at Goonyirba (Koombba), and had already formed a profitable trade with trans-train passengers in walking sticks, snakes, iguanas, etc. They taught their newly arrived tharburda (mixed relations) the use of tomahawk and chisel, and immediately the kandi (flints) and beedili of the new men were thrown aside and the destruction of the trees and shrubs round and about Ooldea Siding was accelerated. The qualms of kangaroo and emu totemists over the making of other totems than their own very quickly sat at rest by seeing their relatives still alive and hearty.

Among the new arrivals, the left-handed men and boys were not only the quickest and most adept learners, but the best artists. Moondoor and his sons Wongiamu and Jinnabulain, and Mobbinya and others, all left-handed, soon outstripped their teachers and turned out very good carvings of snake and lizard and iguana, and carved walking sticks, besides boomerangs and shields all made with the white man's tools only. Many of these products have found their way to Museums, though they are not strictly native products as they are made with white tools, and in imitation of the white man. Moondoor's products find quick sale among the passengers travelling on the East-West line between Kalgoorlie and Port Augusta, but their ineradicable nomadism prevents any effort towards the development and continuance of this lucrative trade. In the eleven years that have passed since their arrival, many have died and the rest have scattered and disintegrated, but at whatever point they reach the E.W. line after their various wanderings, they again take up the new art and buy themselves tobacco, tinned meats and other luxuries from stores or sidings.

In 1929-1930, another group of about forty arrived via Ooldea Water, these also being tharburda (mixed "related" mobs) and these contacting at once with the remnants of the 1920 mob, saw their "civilised" relatives exchange boomerangs,

snakes, lizards, etc., with the white man for little or big white discs which they were told were the white man's milbu (white tail fur of rabbit bandicoot - native "money"), these discs being exchanged again for the white man's "mai" (all vegetable foods, bread, etc.) and tinned tobacco, the most precious of all, as they had finished ogari and bulyandi (two species of native tobacco plant) long before they reached Coldea Water - and the new mob concentrated upon the new art. They had first to learn the use of the white man's tools and as those preceding them had already destroyed every tree of the great plain's eastern and northeastern edge, they had to go further afield for the roots and stems and "abows" that were made into snake and reptile and walking stick.

The new arrivals had no left-handed men or boys amongst them and learning was slower and more difficult, their own weapons being of crude manufacture, except their heavy murderous clubs which men always finely grooved and finished, as it is their principal weapon in their cannibal raiding.

Among the objects illustrated is Moojamoojana's first effort, a dingo's head. He probably had in his mind's eye a whole dingo when he chopped out the wood for his purpose, but the train passengers making neither head nor tail of the object refused it and it was thrown aside. His second attempt, the blind sandburrer (arrujarruja) is really rather a success, showing the attitude of the little creature on its emergence from its deep and lengthy tunnels, but the passengers knew nothing of the interesting little arrujarruja, and the carver was again baffled, and his third attempt was the mulai'ongu (wombat snake) which was so good that dingo and arrujarruja and snake were all traded for with flour, tea, sugar and a shirt to encourage the carver. The burnt markings are all "fanciful" and are made with zinc wire doubled and made red hot, the curves of the double being pressed on the wood. Besides the many accidents during the first use of the tomahawk, the burning in of the marks was attended with many serious wounds on thighs and arms and legs, owing to the constant slipping of the strange tool, When the canny

natives, who had hitherto done all the work, turned this part over to their women, who could follow the patterns shown them. For several weeks, carron oil, iodine and carbolic ointment odours hung to snake and lizard and walking stick offered to train passengers, but gradually the men became proficient in their use of the zinc wire and snakes and such objects as best pleased the whites assured the quickest sales, these were made by all, The manufacture of these taking far less time than boomerang or shield making which must be done with the slowness and sureness that go to the making of all truly native products. It is a curious and remarkable fact that no native will make an iguana or lizard complete with "hands" and feet, even within civilisation, fearing that the wooden image he made might "walk about" and do him evil. In the Kimberley area, the human head drawings are without mouths, because "they might utter evil magic", and in the central areas in the ground drawings of the milbarli (long-tailed iguana) and nyindana (monitor lizard) made with birds' down and blood, etc. by their own human totem kin, neither the feet nor hands of these reptiles are represented.

The objects illustrated, except the milbarli, have been made by the last-comers. Babba (dingo), arrujarruja and Moolalongu (species of snake) are Moolamoojana's work. The larrja (sp. of snake) was made by Mindari; the jalgararra (Daimar) is Marn-ngur's work; the milbarli was made by the last member of the old milbarli group whose principal water is many hundred miles from Coldeas water.

Unhappily, this new industry has extended to the north-eastern edge of the plain some miles as a whole tree that may have taken hundreds of years to grow is destroyed for perhaps one snake or boomerang or other article. The various species of acacia - boggurda, ngauila, walduri, kurriga (called mulga by the white man), which sheltered Coldeea Siding from the hot fierce northerlies, are practically all cut out as the native always uses the bushes nearest to him and when these are destroyed he moves to another little clump, and so on.

One wonders if beneath the sand of the deserts he has come from, there will come up in the years to come, little shoots and growths of old old trees destroyed by his people during the ages of their occupancy of the Central areas.

ABORIGINAL ART

Rock shelters, caves, ground drawings, totemic designs on carved boards, etc.

His simple weapons and implements are generally of good form and workmanship, but he has never made other than incised patterns or drawings upon them, all excrescences in the wood being carefully smoothed down, incised lines and spots, half circles, complete circles, concentric rings, lozenges, ovals of transverse lines, squares, slanting lines, or painted designs of red black and white and grease. There is no carved ornamentation on any of his weapons, or sacred totem boards. Every mark on board or weapon has a definite meaning (ordinary or sacred). On his sacred weapons he incises the symbolisms of his totemic ancestors, on his spear-throwers, incised patterns are made to deflect the thrown spear, on his spear a few lines or spots near the blade mark his ownership of the spear; his boomerangs are unornamented. He makes his ordinary weapons in his ngoora (bough hut) in view of his wives and children, and in this simple easy way his little boys unconsciously learn the woods suitable for each weapon, the manner of working and the different flints used in their manufacture.

He manufactures his sacred weapons apart from his women and children. The totem boards, the longest of which may be 15 feet, and 7 or 8 inches in width, have from time immemorial meant the total destruction by fire of the tree from which the boards was cut. Incisions of the totem are made on the concave side from end to end of the board. No incisions are made on the convex side. When the board has been heated and planed and finished to his satisfaction, it is rubbed with the fat of the totem if obtainable, or the fat of some other totem with which it is "allied". It is periodically rubbed with grease by its maker and his descendants, as the grease preserves it. Boys never see these until they are fully initiated men, and an elder brother or father's younger brother will lend them their first larra (bullroarer) and later they will make a larra for themselves under a brother's tuition, while the legend of the totem and the design is being repeated

to them. Women and children are never allowed to look upon these sacred objects under pain of death.

The drawings in caves and rock shelters were held sacred from women.

Poor artistic capacity. Their groovings and markings are all for utility (totemic and magic). On their totem boards and bullroarers they take great pains with the markings symbolical of the totem. The few rock or cave drawings found in C.A. are crude, but in all cave drawings and ground designs, snake and iguana can be recognised. In making the new objects, snakes, walking sticks, etc., for sale to the white man, some of the artists will take advantage of the natural curve of root or stem and some may utilise a natural peculiarity in a root end to embellish a walking stick on which a snake's head may be crudely outlined.

Ground and cave drawing. They have never made these objects.

He has a correct eye for the curves, etc. in root or stem for snake or iguana or boomerang, but he has to learn walking stick making by much practice. Also carving a snake on walking stick is entirely a new art, as the snake is raised round the wood, and no raised carving on weapon or sacred implement has developed amongst them, probably because he found that raised carvings prevented the easy rubbing of ochre and fat with which all are covered and preserved.

In his own environment his ornamentations were groovings or painted designs.

These Central aborigines have learned the new art from "relatives" long in contact with the white people on Missions, Stations, and the fringes of white settlement. Some really develop an artistic sense in stick carvings and even in their decorated snakes, etc., the necessary stimulus being the money they receive from white men for these new products. So far they have not developed the capacity for completing the objects, iguanas, etc., with feet and hands. Whether this is due to inability or the innate fear a native has of making anything complete (as in the remarkable drawings in some Kimberley human figures and elsewhere where the mouth is always absent),

as the native has all his life been in fear of the totem magic hidden in bullroarer or totem board totem designs, he takes every precaution regarding the new art he is developing. All his objects are made with the white man's tools, tomahawk and chisel and zinc wire made red hot. He has the correct "eye" for the shape of snake origuana or boomerang in root or stem, and a tree with a snaky or boomerang-shaped root will unhappily be sacrificed. In the beginning of their new art, the men often burned themselves through the slipping of the folded and red hot zinc wire, and they passed this portion of their work on to their women, so that in the beginning of the new, there were many cases of burnt thighs, arms, legs, etc., through mishandling of the new etching implement.

Their utilisation of their women in this work shows what little value it is in their eyes, but the waijela like them.

All their own designs have a definite meaning to them, and these were never made in their own huts. The wives might see the making of wooden scoops, clubs, boomerangs, spears and spearthrowers, but beyond carrying these from camp to camp, they were not allowed to touch or handle them, and even with the new art, the women can only follow the design shown them by their men, who make the first burnt markings for their women to copy.