

# Connection to country: art of Australia's first behavioural ecologists

29 September – 04 October 2024

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The First Nations people of Australia are the oldest continuous living culture in the world, with a deep connection to country dating back at least 65,000 years. This rich history is embodied in creation stories, in dance, in ceremony, and above all, in the diverse art and art practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Wildlife features prominently in the oral and visual narratives of First Nations people. Engravings of bird and kangaroo tracks, and images of Thylacine and echidnas painted in ochres, have been found on rocks and rock shelter sites dating as far back as 20,000 BCE.

In more modern times, animals appear as totems carved out of milkwood by the Wik people of Far North Queensland, and as sculptures woven out of sedges by Nharrindjeri artists from southern Australia. They are depicted on painted boards used for Gurirr Gurirr song and dance ceremonies in the East Kimberley region by the Gija people in north western Australia, and they can be found painted—with x-ray detail—on the bark of Eucalypts by the Kuwinjku people from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Very often, the artwork themselves capture astute and sensitive observations of wildlife in action: a crocodile tending to its nest, a mixed species flock of sulphur crested cockatoos and galahs sitting on a tree, or a group of schooling fish. These artworks of animal behaviour, depicted in the context of the environments in which these animals inhabit, make the First Nations people of Australia the very first behavioural ecologists on the continent.

In a first for an International Society for Behavioral Ecology Congress, ISBE2024 is proud to have worked in collaboration with Chapman and Baily to specially curate an exhibition of First Nations art to coincide with the Melbourne Congress.

Drawn from indigenous communities and art centres across Australia, the works in this exhibition showcase the diverse art and art practice of our First Peoples, from bark paintings and decorated hollow logs (lorrkon) from northern Australia to modern-day acrylics on canvas from the central desert region and sculptures constructed out of salvaged ghost nets from North Queensland. These artworks not only reflect the deep cultural and spiritual connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have with their country, but also highlight the ingenuity, modernity, power and resilience of First Nations culture in a changed and changing world.

I hope you enjoy the art of Australia's first behavioural ecologists.