

## **1983/4 - The FIRST works painted by ROVER THOMAS**

**An investigation of the first fourteen works attributed to Rover Thomas, in order to determine which can be reliably attributed to his oeuvre and of those works, to better understand the order in which they were painted.**

This investigation has entailed questioning the provenance details found in an otherwise reliable source, a catalogue *Roads Cross: The paintings of Rover Thomas*, produced in 1994 for the National Gallery of Australia (NGA).

### **(A) A contested attribution - at auction**

‘Lurintjipungu (Clara Springs)’ 46 x 61 masonite, a Krill Krill /Kurirr Kurirr board which was offered by Sotheby’s in November 2007, by festival organizer (Derek Holroyde), who bought it in April 1983 from Rover Thomas at the conclusion of the Aboriginal Arts in Perth 83 Festival, where it had been used in a performance by Turkey Creek people. Sotheby’s catalogued it as the work of Rover Thomas.

However another Krill Krill board also from 1983, which was sold earlier by Sotheby’s in 2001, might raise doubt about the attribution described above.

The board entitled, ‘Ngumurli Warra (Cyclone Tracy)’ 1983 92 x 92 plywood (employing the distinctive helmet shape to represent the cyclone) and likely to be recycled tea chest panel or lining board, is attributed to Paddy Jaminji.

The provenance for this work notes, it was “acquired from Rover Thomas in Darwin after it was used in a public performance of the Krill Krill Ceremony on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1983, from a descriptive label by Ian Kirkby”.

So although the work was clearly painted by Paddy Jaminji, Ian Kirkby, an anthropologist and a research officer for the WA Museum based in Warmun at the time, was required to pay Rover Thomas when he bought it, as Rover Thomas owned the ceremony.

In my opinion, a visual comparison of these two 1983 Krill Krill boards, from the Aboriginal Arts in Perth 83 Festival, suggests they were made by the same hand and most likely, by Paddy Jaminji.

### **(B) Mis-attributions - four works in the NGA collection, exhibited and described, *Roads Cross, The Paintings of Rover Thomas*, 1994.**

‘Barramundi Dreaming’, claimed by Rover Thomas as a solo work but actually by Paddy Jaminji, furthermore the subject is not a Barramundi Dreaming but the site, Yullumbu.

This correction is based on the Mary Macha Painting Catalogue, as seen in February 2008 and documented by Catherine Carr in 2010.

And three works from the Krill Krill Series -

‘The spirits Jimpi and Maginta’, claimed as a joint work but actually by Paddy Jaminji.  
‘The Dreaming Kangaroo at nine mile Wyndham’, claimed as a joint work but actually by Paddy Jaminji.

‘The Rainbow Serpent Destroyed Darwin’ (another helmet shaped cyclone), claimed by Rover Thomas as a solo work but actually by Paddy Jaminji.

These corrections are based on hand-written annotations to the draft of the NGA *Roads Cross: The Paintings of Rover Thomas* catalogue, made by Mary Macha and Kim Akerman at the time and my discussions with them later during the course of my Ph.D research. Macha and Akerman believed these mis-attributions arose because in 1993 Rover Thomas told Wally Caruana he had painted them.

These corrections are corroborated by information in the Paintings Catalogue in the Mary Macha Archives on the paintings themselves when first collected, and further by the letter sent to the NGA by Mary Macha with the works in 1984, which explicitly states that only one of the Kurirr Kurirr/ Krill Krill paintings was by Rover Thomas.

These mis-attributions are understandable and explicable and persist in relation to the first Kurirr Kurirr/ Krill Krill boards, because there was a tussle going on between Paddy Jaminji and Rover Thomas about who painted what, who owned what and who was entitled to paint what. Rover Thomas claimed works as his because as far as he was concerned owning the ceremony was the determining factor.

These mis-attributions point to the disjunction between the ceremonial and the everyday, the group and the individual, traditional culture and the art object, as the boards move from being ephemeral objects used in a ceremony embedded in a remote community to a permanent objects valued by the metropolitan art world.

**Having dealt with these six works which cannot be reliably attributed to Rover Thomas, I will now consider the ones from this period than can be attributed to him.**

**(C) Two Kangaroos** on masonite (composition board)

**P1** ‘Kangaroo (at Barawooban’) 101 x137 irreg. on masonite.

The work was seen and photographed by Rimas Riauba in the Wangkul store in October 1983 and later that year seen there by Chips Mackinolty. We cannot be certain when it was painted, only that it was before October 1983. Later it was displayed in the Turkey Creek Roadhouse, from where Rover Thomas sold it to a named collector in 1987.

**P9** ‘Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs’ 91 x 94 on masonite.

The painting was sold by Rover Thomas to the Wangkul store manager, on 19 March 1984. We cannot be certain however, when exactly it was painted, only that it was before March 19. 1984. In 1998 it was sold at Sotheby’s.

For more details on the deailed context of these two paintings,  
See - Provenance Assessment for ‘Kangaroo (at Barawooban’), 2020 by this author.

**(D) Three works boards** size 46 x 62 on hardboard and masonite.

**P2** 'The Dog and the Emu at Lake Gregory'/'Lake Gregory', hardboard.

**P3** 'Pompey's Pillar (Pangkalji)'/(Hill on Texas Downs) 'Yilirpirn', hardboard.

**P4** 'Lulumalulu at Mount House'/'Lumoolulu at Mount House', masonite.

These three works are all dated 1983 and assembled together by Mary Macha at an unknown date, and sold to NGA in 1987. Their collection details are scant, in both the Mary Macha Archive and the NGA records (Wally Caruana, 2020). They were most likely collected by Don McLeod as Mary Macha's agent and the information sent sometime afterwards to Macha in Perth. They appear to have been collected and first photographed at the same time as four Krill Krill boards attributed to Paddy Jaminji, suggesting some connection between them. It is a moot point however, whether they were made or used as Kurirr Kurirr/ Krill Krill boards.

In the Mary Macha Painting Catalogue, P3 is titled 'Hill on Texas Downs', which is what it looks like, and if so, it would mean this work and P2 are not associated with the Kurirr Kurirr/ Krill Krill, rather they are subjects from Rover Thomas's own domain, his life experience and desert dreamings.

NOTE the size of these masonite boards is the same as some of the Krill Krill boards described above, suggesting a tea chest top - often made from masonite for ease of repeated removal - or building material left over, found at Turkey Creek. Tea chests and hence tea chest tops vary in size and range from 60-65 x 40-51 x 36-41cms.

**(E) Two VRD Krill Krill boards** size 60 x 90 on board

**P7** A. 'Rainbow Snake Dreaming' (Kurirr Kurirr)

**P8** B. 'Rainbow Snake Dreaming' (Kurirr Kurirr)

Depicts Kamorli country, Rainbow Snake Dreaming, (VRD)Victoria River Downs. Confidently painted in rust red, grey black and pale yellow with white dots. Collected by Mary Macha and designated 1983. The date is otherwise not specified in her records. Sold to the Holmes a Court Collection in 1986.

It is likely these boards were made for a Kurirr Kurirr performance at VRD station by the Turkey Creek people. They are about the host country rather than the sites of the Kurirr Kurirr.

**Two Paintings on marine plywood (F) and ((G)**

Contrary to my earlier understanding and referred to in my PhD; according to Wally Caruana (August, 2020) there was actually no commission as such from the NGA. Rather Mary Macha commissioned work from Paddy Jaminji and Rover Thomas and these works were part of a larger set of Krill Krill boards Mary Macha offered first to Alistair McAlpine, and then to the NGA, who bought them in 1984.

The following work is painted on marine plywood supplied by Mary Macha in set sizes, making it the first work explicitly commissioned by Mary Macha.

**(F) A Painting on marine plywood**

**P6** ‘Wungurr is the name for that snake’, 120 x 60, Plywood, 1983, NGA 1984.

**(G) Another Painting on marine plywood**

A very small plywood work from Mary Macha Private Collection, which was painted and collected at the same time as the above work. However it did not appear until after Mary Macha’s death, when it was offered at Bonhams auction in 2017.

**P5** ‘Mistake Creek’, 47 x 47, Plywood, 1983.

Correspondence and travel itineraries in the Mary Macha Archive show Macha visited Turkey Creek in December 1983 to discuss painting materials with Paddy Jaminji. Contextual evidence indicates Rover Thomas did not meet with her then. After her lightning visit and the delivery of the marine plywood, Macha instructed Paddy Jaminji to give “some to Rover if he wants”, and in her letter to Rover Thomas, she says she will pay him for work the same as she is paying Paddy Jaminji.

It can be inferred, Rover Thomas painted these two works on marine plywood in the last week of December 1983.

**Conclusion**

**Of the Fourteen works under investigation, five in my opinion have been mis-attributed, and should be re-attributed to Paddy Jamnji, leaving nine works, which can be reliably attributed to Rover Thomas.**

**These 9 earliest works, designated P1-P9 comprise,**

Group (C) 2 works which Rover Thomas displayed in the Wungkul store and sold himself (the Kangaroos).

Group (D) 3 works which Rover Thomas did unbidden (on found materials) sold to Mary Macha. In 1987 she sold them to the NGA.

Group (E) 2 works which were sold to Mary Macha. In 1986 Mary Macha sold them to the Holmes a Court Collection.

Groups (F) and (G), 2 works on marine plywood, which were commissioned by Mary Macha, one was sold in 1984 to the NGA, the other remained with Macha until her death. Of the nine works only those in groups (C), (F) and (G) ie four works can be reliably dated. The five works in groups (D) and (E) are designated by Mary Macha as painted in 1983 but there is no other detail offered by Mary Macha or any contemporaneous corroboration. As there is no evidence to the contrary, the date stands. In my opinion, from the material appearance, group (D) was painted before group (E).

**A sequence based on materials used and the palette employed.**

These nine works fall into three groups classified by the ochre palette they employ -

(i) Red brown oxide and white

**P1** 'Kangaroo (at Barawooban)'

(ii) Black, White and Tan/Brown

**P2** 'The Dog and the Emu at Lake Gregory',

**P3** 'Pompey's Pillar (Pangkalji)'

**P4** 'Lulumalulu at Mount House'

**P5** 'Mistake Creek'

(iii) Black, White, Rust Red, and Yellow

**P6** 'Wungurr is the name for that snake'

**P7** 'Rainbow Snake Dreaming' (Kurirr Kurirr)

**P8** 'Rainbow Snake Dreaming' (Kurirr Kurirr)

**P9** 'Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs'

'Kangaroo (at Barawooban)' is painted in local red brown oxide ochres with minimal white ochre, whereas 'The Dog and the Emu at Lake Gregory', 'Pompey's Pillar (Pangkalji)', 'Lulumalulu at Mount House', 'Mistake Creek', 'Wungurr is the name for that snake', 'Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs' and the pair, 'Rainbow Snake Dreaming' employ an extended palette and all use black, which is strikingly absent from 'Kangaroo (at Barawooban)'.

In my opinion this is a further indication that this painting was first in the sequence. Subsequently Rover Thomas invariably used black in his paintings.

**On all the evidence available now, the above sequence P1 to P9 is the most likely order in which Rover Thomas painted his first nine paintings, making – 'Kangaroo (at Barawooban)' his first painting.**

17 September 2020 / revised 4 November 2020

Dr Suzanne Spinner

## References

**Mary Macha Paintings Catalogue for Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji-** digitised 2017, by Suzanne Spinner and Lyndon Ormond-Parker; previously seen and described in 2008 by Catherine Carr, 2010.

**Mary Macha Archives -** including a fax from Chips Mackinolty, correspondence between Mary Macha and the artists, and travel itineraries.

### **Sotheby's Auction Catalogues**

**'Roads Cross, The Paintings of Rover Thomas,** NGA Catalogue, 1994 .

**'Rover Thomas: I want to Paint',** Holmes a Court Collection published Heytesbury, Holdings, 2003.

**Interviews, emails and discussions:** Rimas Riauba and Wally Caruana, 2010-2020.

**Provenance Assessment for 'Kangaroo (at Barawooban)' -** Suzanne Spinner (2020)

**Early Timeline (1975-1986)** - based primarily on the correspondence between Mary Macha and the artists from the time Rover Thomas found the Kurrir Kurrir to the beginning of Waringarri Arts - Suzanne Spinner (2020).

**Catherine Carr,** 'What is a Rover Thomas painting?' PhD. University of Woollongong, 2010.

**Suzanne Spinner,** 'Vindicating Rover Thomas', PhD. University of Melbourne, 2012.

