



Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art (Objects/Histories)

Fred R. Myers

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Painting Culture tells the complex story of how, over the past three decades, the acrylic "dot" paintings of central Australia were transformed into objects of international high art, eagerly sought by upscale galleries and collectors. Since the early 1970s, Fred R. Myers has studied—often as a participant-observer—the Pintupi, one of several Aboriginal groups who paint the famous acrylic works. Describing their paintings and the complicated cultural issues they raise, Myers looks at how the paintings represent Aboriginal people and their culture and how their heritage is translated into exchangeable values. He tracks the way these paintings become high art as they move outward from indigenous communities through and among other social institutions—the world of dealers, museums, and critics. At the same time, he shows how this change in the status of the acrylic paintings is directly related to the initiative of the painters themselves and their hopes for greater levels of recognition.

Painting Culture describes in detail the actual practice of painting, insisting that such a focus is necessary to engage directly with the role of the art in the lives of contemporary Aboriginals. The book includes a unique local art history, a study of the complete corpus of two painters over a two-year period. It also explores the awkward local issues around the valuation and sale of the acrylic paintings, traces the shifting approaches of the Australian government and key organizations such as the Aboriginal Arts Board to the promotion of the work, and describes the early and subsequent phases of the works' inclusion in major Australian and international exhibitions. Myers provides an account of some of the events related to these exhibits, most notably the Asia Society's 1988 "Dreamings" show in New York, which was so pivotal in bringing the work to North American notice. He also traces the approaches and concerns of dealers, ranging from semi-tourist outlets in Alice Springs to more prestigious venues in Sydney and Melbourne.

With its innovative approach to the transnational circulation of culture, this book will appeal to art historians, as well as those in cultural anthropology, cultural studies, museum studies, and performance studies.

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