



four sisters

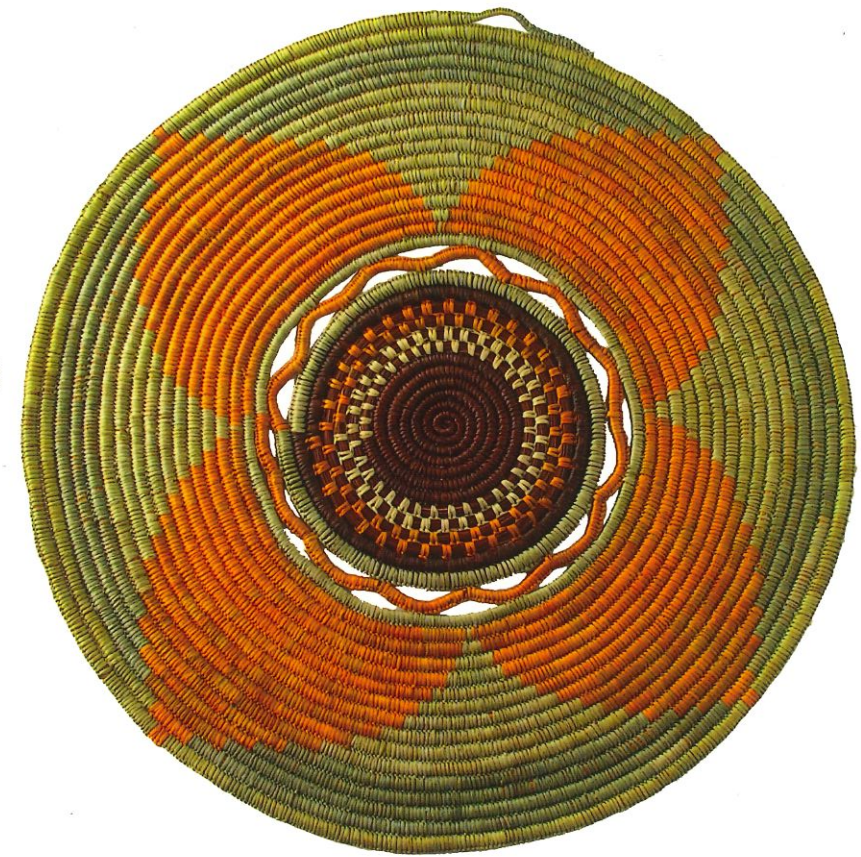
fibreart from west Arnhem land

A new exhibition celebrates the work of fibre artists from western Arnhem Land, among them four sisters—Jill Nganjmirra, Marlene Burrunali, Betty Namarnyilk and Leanne Guymala—of the Bularlhdja clan. The exhibition's curator, **Louise Hamby**, explores particular influences in their work.

Western Arnhem Land is famous for its beautiful stone country and its extraordinary rock art, bark painters and, more recently, its fibre artists. Women from Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) are now demanding and receiving well-deserved recognition for their fibre work. *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken* is a travelling exhibition from Injalak Arts and Crafts that opens at the Melbourne Museum in May 2005, and is being toured nationally by Museum Victoria. Its aim is to promote the unique identity of western Arnhem Land fibre art, and to share with visitors the story of the continuous, dynamic production of fibre objects.

Over 50 Kunwinjku-speaking artists from Gunbalanya and its surrounding outstations will be featured in the show, with primarily contemporary work on display, complemented by historic works dating from the 1890s. Within this group of artists, many of the women are related to each other: they are linked as mothers, daughters and sisters. Close kin relationships are integral in the transmission of cultural information and stylistic details (such as form and design). Jill Nganjmirra, Marlene Burrunali, Betty Namarnyilk and Leanne Guymala are four sisters of the Bularlhdja clan. They are all daughters of Spider Namirrki, and live at three outstations to the east of the township of Gunbalanya. Each has produced work that is informed by their individual styles, while displaying some similarities as well. As Jill Nganjmirra explains, 'All of us make baskets, mats, string bags and dilly bags'.¹ The sisters share a commonality of influences from the Gunbalanya area and beyond, including Goulburn Island where their grandmother still lives.

Jill Nganjmirra and Marlene Burrunali live at Mamadawerre, one of the largest outstations in the Gunbalanya area. Betty Namarnyilk lives at Gamarrgowan and Leanne Guymala lives at Manmoyi. These two outstations are only about 15 kilometres apart, and are on the far eastern side of the area serviced by Injalak Arts and Crafts. The sisters all grew up on missions and were taught their fibre art skills there. Missionaries and others who worked in the community, before the development of Injalak Arts and Crafts, had a strong influence over fibre production—because they only bought certain types of baskets to sell to the



south, those forms, with particular characteristics, dominated production. They wanted functional domestic works, such as household shopping baskets. The baskets had to have flat bottoms, so they would stand unaided, and handles, so they could be carried easily.

Some of these characteristics are present in the work of the four sisters, others are illusory, and some are not present at all. What is consistent in their work is the use of the coiling technique and the vibrant colours provided by dyes from the plant *haemodorum coccineum*, which gives bright hues, such as pinks and purples. This plant only grows in the stone country, making it unique to the region and very desirable to other fibre artists to the east.

In addition to being sisters who work together, Jill Nganjmirra and Marlene Burrunali also live close to each other, adding to their own exchange of ideas. Residing at Mamadawerre is less hectic than town, and has influenced other artists, such as Rose Nabobbob, to go there to work with the large group of women who already live and work there, including four other artist-sisters (Doreen and Margaret Nabalwad, Molly Nayilibidj and Janice Nalorlman). Many of these women also have daughters who make baskets.

Jill Nganjmirra was the first artist to make fibre objects with a floral motif. She originally made a basket with a four-petalled flower at the base and continuing up the side of the basket.

She then produced a coiled mat in a similar design (pictured above), with four large yellow petals that radiate from a centre made from openwork coiling.

'In the middle where I started is all plain coiled fibre and in the middle I put open stitch. It is similar like a flower when it first opens and you can see parts where it is coming out. 2/2 pattern [use of two stitches close together and then open space and then repeated]; I have to put it a bit close.²

The design of this mat is significant in its combination of new imagery, like the flower, with older structural features that were, in the past, influenced by the missionaries. The mat itself is flat and coiled, both construction aspects that were introduced to Arnhem Land. The zigzag openwork around the base of the flower is an element not only of earlier fibre art techniques but also arrived at Kunbalanya via missionaries who had learnt it from Aboriginal people in the south east.

Opposite page: Leanne Guymala, *Coiled oval basket* (detail), 2002, dyed pandanus.

Above: Jill Nganjmirra, *Coiled flower mat*, 2002, dyed pandanus.

Photos: Louise Hamby.

Nganjmirra's older sister, Marlene Burrunali, also made a flower basket, (detail pictured below) but with a different design. In hers, four petals morph into irregular vertical bands up the side of the basket. Marlene Burrunali's daughter, Jeanette Burrunali, produced a similar design in a basket, assisted by Nganjmirra and Burrunali. Marlene Burrunali also creates dramatic effects with double stitching in some of her work.

Betty Namarnyilk's fibre baskets have handles and appear capable of carrying objects—as do her other sisters' baskets—but they all have inconsistencies between form and function. None of the baskets are designed to carry heavy loads and, in the case of Betty Namarnyilk's openwork basket (pictured opposite), it can't carry much at all. They are made simply to admire. All the sisters retain the basket form in their work, perhaps because it makes their fibre art more accessible for the maker and buyer, but the emphasis is on the interest of the design. Perhaps their work has even metamorphosed from being purely functional, to being pure art. Leanne Guymala teases the viewer even more with her conical coiled basket—it does not even stand by itself, and has a handle that would normally be placed on a flat-bottomed basket. This upright basket is based on a classic, twined, conical basket that has been made in Arnhem Land for hundreds of years. The openwork basket's handle is unusual in that it moves from side to side—this type of handle is known to Kunwinjku as *kaberlmankan*.

Below: Marlene Burrunali, *Coiled flower basket* (detail), 2003, dyed pandanus.

Opposite page, top, left to right: Marlene Burrunali, *Coiled flower basket*, 2003, dyed pandanus; Betty Namarnyilk, *Coiled openwork basket*, 2003, dyed pandanus; Leanne Guymala, *Coiled oval basket*, 2002, dyed pandanus.

Photos: Louise Hamby.

Opposite page, portraits, top to bottom: Jill Nganjmirra, photo: Louise Hamby; Betty Namarnyilk, photo: Allison Thatcher; Marlene Burrunali, photo: Louise Hamby.



At Manmoyi, Leanne Guymala combines different coiling stitches (like her sister Marlene Burrunali also does), creating horizontal patterns in her oval basket (pictured above). This form is the closest to the open shopping-style baskets, or a small version of a baby basket considered so desirable by missionaries. This work features a handle that has a plait interwoven between the single coils on either side, adding visual complexity. The handle itself is a structural one in that the coils forming it are part of the coils that form the side of the basket. Another basket by Guymala, might also have been inspired from the original 'fancy work' that Aboriginal women were taught by missionaries. Guymala has constructed an entire basket in a crochet-like, lacy stitch, more usually used for the edging, and made it using the orange and the pink dyes from *haemodorum coccineum*. Even the bottom of the basket is constructed in this light airy technique. This basket has been made to be seen, not used.

The work of these four sisters provides a glimpse into the styles and histories that make up *Twined Together*. As Jill Nganjmirra says, 'We are teaching children to weave so when you die the tradition will be carried on throughout family and they will teach their family.'³ Their stories are linked with their fellow fibre artists, who seek to show us '*Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*': 'everything about baskets and fibre containers'.

Louise Hamby is a researcher, curator and writer based at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University in Canberra. She is currently an ARC Postdoctoral Fellow.

Endnotes

1. Nganjmirra, J. (2004). Interview about Jill Nganjmirra's sisters. A. Thatcher. Kunbalanya.
2. Nganjmirra, J. (2004). Interview with Mamadawerre Women. L. Hamby. Gunbalanya.
3. Nganjmirra, J. (2004). Interview about Jill Nganjmirra's sisters. A. Thatcher. Kunbalanya.

