

Yolngu power: the art of Yirrkala

Learning resource

Art
Gallery
NSW



Yolŋu need gamunungu ga manikay. The designs and the songs. It comes from our body. It comes from our minds. It comes from the ground. This is where our power comes from. Each clan has its own essence and its own energy coming through its own identity. When all these separate powers combine into one infinite universal whole expressing all the facets of creation, this is the true Yolŋu power.

This power is coming to us from the past. It has been brought to us by our old people. It is flowing through each generation and getting stronger each time it is passed on.

– Binygurr Wirrpanda, 2025

This learning resource is designed to engage primary and secondary students with the exhibition *Yolŋu power: the art of Yirrkala* through an in-depth study of five focus artworks. It encourages students to create art, think critically and discuss the artists of Yirrkala and the power of their art from the 1940s to today.

Use this resource to accompany a visit to *Yolŋu power: the art of Yirrkala*, on view at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 21 June to 6 October 2025.

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Introduction

The art of Yirrkala is inextricably intertwined with its cultural, political and social history. For 90 years, artists at Yirrkala have shared art as a means of cultural diplomacy – as a respectful assertion of power in its diverse forms, from sovereignty to influence, authority and control, to energy, strength and pride.

The exhibition *Yolŋu power* looks at the distinct moments in Yirrkala's history when artists have changed art-making for a very particular reason – whether through the adoption of new materials, or in response to social, political or cultural imperatives. The exhibition charts these deliberate shifts and changes in practice over time.

At the heart of the art from Yirrkala is an invitation to see and experience country – its cultural foundations, seasonal changes and interconnected ecosystems – through Yolŋu eyes and minds. This is the power of Yolŋu art – its gentle persuasion is born of generosity.

As you wander through the exhibition, think about this invitation to see and understand Yolŋu art and its power to communicate country.

Key questions

Think broadly about these questions as you explore the exhibition.

- What information and ideas are being shared with you through these artworks and why?
- What are miny'tji and how are they represented in the exhibition?
- What artistic approaches are used and how have these practices shifted over time?
- How do artists from Yirrkala assert power through art?

How do you say the letter 'ŋ'?

Nj or ŋ sounds like 'ng' in sing or ring. It's one of several special letters in the Yolŋu Matha alphabet to indicate certain sounds

'Land has everything it needs, but it could not speak. It could not express itself, tell its identity, so it grew a tongue. That is the Yolngu.'

Yirrkala is a small Aboriginal community located on the north-east coast of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, approximately 700 kilometres east of Darwin.

Most of the artists live in small, remote homelands on their familial country in the surrounding region, and within many of these the number of artists per capita is remarkable: art is embedded in Yolŋu life, and the creation of art is a means of upholding social and cultural responsibilities.

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In 1976, in an era of increasing Aboriginal self-determination and a focus on land rights, the community-owned Yirrkala Art and Craft Centre was established. In 1983, it was renamed Buku-Larrngay Mulka – Buku-Larrngay meaning ‘the feeling on your face as it is struck by the first rays of the sun’ and Mulka ‘a sacred but public ceremony’.

In 1988, a museum was established within the art centre allowing the display of the Yirrkala Church Panels and the Yirrkala Homeland School Collection that was compiled in the 1970s to detail clan law. Like the Church Panels, the Homeland School Collection is displayed in Yirritja and Dhuwa moieties – the complementary kinship groups that ensure balance within the Yolŋu world – with separate sections for each clan within them.

Today the Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre supports the economic and social wellbeing of the community and helps to sustain and protect Yolŋu cultural knowledge through art and digital archiving.

In 2007, The Mulka Project was established within Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre. This audiovisual archive, production studio and digital learning centre enables Yolŋu control of a living archive and has provided opportunities to explore the digital as an artistic medium.



Entrance sign to Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, March 2025, photo © Art Gallery of New South Wales, Leicolhn McKellar

Wanapati Yunupinu

Gurtha 2021

'I only make this design, the patterns of fire and also the water beneath ... These diamonds mean, they're knowledge of the old people and where this story is from, Blue Mud Bay right up to here, to Biranybirany.'

– Wanapati Yunupinu, 2022

The diamond design employed by Wanapati Yunupinu (b1989) refers to gurtha, a fire that travelled across a vast area of country in the Wanarr, or time of the first morning, causing a series of significant events. Yunupinu's art centre, Buku-Larrnggay Mulka in Yirrkala, Northern Territory, detail some of these events and the connections that were subsequently established between people, animals and places because of the fire:

Djirikitj, the quail (sometimes called the 'fire-making bird'), picked up a burning twig from this fire and flew away with it, dropping it at Maṭamaṭa. There is a large paperbark swamp at Maṭamaṭa, where native honeybees live. Fire from the burning twig dropped by Djirikitj took hold of the tall grass in the swamp area and the native bees fled to Djiliwirri in Gupapuyngu clan Country. Thus, Gupapuyngu honey and Gumatj fire are linked through these ancestral events, and also refer to a relationship between these two clans which is played out in ceremony.



Discussion questions

- Look closely at *Gurtha 2021* by Wanapati Yunupingu and describe its qualities. Consider line, colour, geometric form, optical effect and composition. Move around and notice the changing effects of light on the etched sections of metal. How does this work suggest fire's flickering movement?
- Yunupingu has sourced an old roadwork sign left behind on country to create this artwork. Look closely and try to identify elements that show its original use as a road sign. What role do such signs play? Discuss how Yunupingu's etching of the gurtha designs across its surface may have transformed it into a more culturally relevant signpost.

Mawalan Marika, Wandjuk Marika, Mathaman Marika, Wadaymu Ganambar *Djan'kawu creation story* 1959

'This message and voice has to be passed on ... We still own the story of the Djan'kawu coming in from the east, from Burralku, and then arriving at Yalanbara. That story, it happens to be our constitution, our governance, and it talks about the unity to other clans.'

– Wanyubi Marika, 2013

Djan'kawu creation story 1959 depicts the journey of the Djan'kawu sisters and their brother (the first ancestors of the Rirratjinu people) as they paddled westwards across the sea from the island of Burralku far to the east, and their arrival at Yalanbara on the coast of Arnhem Land. They travelled with the light of the morning star.

This is the first in a series of five large paintings depicting the journey of the Djan'kawu. The paintings show how the Djan'kawu continued their journey across Arnhem Land to Milingimbi in the west. As they travelled, they named and shaped and sang about many aspects of the world. They gave birth to the Rirratjinu people and gave them their language. They also laid down miny'tji (sacred clan designs) which are painted on the body for ceremony and are the basis from which all sacred art at Yirrkala is derived. Miny'tji determine rights to country and underpin the ongoing connections between people.

The suite of Djan'kawu paintings was created for the Art Gallery of New South Wales as part of a major art commission in 1959, which shifted perceptions and contributed to the appreciation of work from Yirrkala as 'art'.

Mawalan Marika, Wandjuk Marika, Mathaman Marika, Wadaymu Ganambarr, *Djan'kawu creation story* 1959, natural pigments on bark, 191.8 × 69.8 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959 © Estate of the artists, Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala



The creation of these large works signalled a profound turning point in the art of Yirrkala. Their scale and ambition would lay the foundations for Yolŋu painting to flourish, culminating in the large-scale Yirrkala Church Panels of 1962, which were designed to sit on either side of the Yirrkala mission's church altar, and the politically significant Nāku Dhäruk (Yirrkala Bark Petitions) in 1963.

Discussion questions

- Notice how this work is divided into sections or episodes in a story. How many sections are there? Look closely at each section. Can you identify a sequence of events? Where do you think they begin? What birds, fish and animals do you see? Can you find the Djan'kawu sisters and their brother? How did you identify them?
- *Djan'kawu creation story* was created collaboratively. Look closely and describe the artists' use of brushstrokes, colour and linework to create the intricate patterning of the miny'tji. Can you identify different hands at work? How do you think the artists worked on the painting? What materials did they use? Discuss why these artists may have chosen to work together.

What are miny'tji?

Miny'tji are sacred designs belonging to a particular artist and their clan. Painted on the body for ceremony, they determine rights to country and underpin the ongoing connections between people. Miny'tji are the basis from which all sacred art at Yirrkala is derived.

Malaluba Gumana

Garrimala 2007

'Malaluba pioneered the technique of grinding and mixing on the rock the pure colours of red, yellow, black and white into combined admixtures and then storing them in liquid form in containers. This is how she is able to maintain colour consistency in olive, grey and pink across a massive work despite using natural pigments.'

– Will Stubbs, in 'Neighbours', *Malaluba Gumana, Djirrirra Wunungmurra*, exh cat, Annandale Galleries, Sydney, 2015

Malaluba Gumana (1952–2020) was a Dhalwangu artist from Gängan, a small inland riverside community in north-east Arnhem Land. She is known for her bark paintings and larrakitj on which she paints her mother's Gälpu clan designs of dhatam (waterlily), djari (rainbow), djaykung (filesnake) and wititj (olive python).

Garrimala refers to a billabong close to Gumana's homeland of Gängan. Dominating the work are realistic representations of dhatam, the waterlily plant, scaling the entire form of the larrakitj. Delicate miny'tji (clan designs) are set behind these graceful forms to represent djari (rainbows) and the power of lightning infused within them.

Garrimala is particularly important to Gumana's mother's Gälpu clan and is connected to Wititj (an olive python commonly referred to as the rainbow serpent). Djayku (the Javanese filesnake) is a companion and possible alternate incarnation of Wititj and lives amongst the dhatam, causing ripples or rainbows on the surface of the water. The sun shining on the scales of Wititj also give the appearance of rainbows. Wititj is associated with the beginning of the wet season, when square-shaped clouds begin to form and lightning strikes are common.



Discussion questions

- Observe the dhatam, or waterlily plant, that climbs up the form of the *Iarrakitj*. Count the number of leaves you can see. Do you notice a pattern, symmetry or repetition to their arrangement? Can you locate its root and flower? How did you identify them?
- Compare and describe the colours in *Garrimala* to those used on some of the surrounding artworks. Malaluba Gumana developed a technique of grinding and mixing pure ochres of red, yellow, black and white and storing them in liquid form to enable consistency of colour. Can you see the effect of this technique in this work? What are the advantages of working in this way?

Gunybi Ganambarr

Gapu 2017



Gunybi Ganambarr (b1973) is a maverick. Never content to be restrained by convention, his work is a constant site of innovation that has redefined the boundaries of Yolŋu art. Yet despite his inventive spirit, Ganambarr is deeply respectful of protocols, expertly balancing his avant-garde approach with cultural obligation.

In reclaiming remnants from mining and building sites, Ganambarr clears country of detritus. And by transforming these materials into artworks he poignantly comments on the changes wrought on country by their presence. At the heart of his practice is an exploration of country; how it is owned, how it is shared and how it is utilised.

Ganambarr's experimental approach first came to attention in 2006 at the *Young Guns* exhibition at Annandale Galleries, Sydney, and he has since challenged expectations with his choice of materials – from conventional bark and wood to chicken wire, rubber, glass, roofing insulation and galvanised iron – and how he uses them. For Ganambarr, these discarded remnants from mining and building sites align with his art centre's policy of only employing materials derived from the land.

Mining has had a major impact in north-eastern Arnhem Land and Ganambarr directly references the complexities of this in *Gapu* 2017. He has transformed an old conveyer belt – an object that has expediently transported the riches of country away –

by intricately incising it with Dhalwangu clan designs for freshwater, or gapu. These detailed designs have been firmly attached to place since the Wanarr, or time of the first morning, and denote ownership of and responsibility for country: rights that have been eroded as the surface of country itself has been removed.

Discussion questions

- Move around and look at *Gapu* 2017 by Gunybi Ganambarr from different angles. What shapes and designs do you see? How might the surface feel if you were to touch it? Notice how light shimmers off the surface as your eye moves across the sculpture. List words to describe the effect. The artwork's title, *Gapu*, is the Yolŋu word for freshwater. Describe ways in which the artwork suggests the movement of water.
- Look closely at the material and surface of this work. It is made with an old conveyer belt sourced from the mining industry. What techniques and processes do you think Ganambarr used to create the work? Why do you think it's displayed flat? Discuss the reasons why the artist chose this material and the complex meanings it adds. Find other works made with reclaimed materials from country in the exhibition. What is the effect of carving miny'tji across these surfaces?

Djakanju Yunupingu

Nyalala gurmilili 2024

In this painting, Djakanju Yunupingu (b1949) depicts the miwatj, or 'sunrise side' – the north-easternmost part of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, where the land is first touched by the rising sun. She depicts the landscape during April and the start of Midawarr (the harvest season following the wet), when the earth receives sudden surprise showers even though it is meant to be dry.

Yunupingu paints lore connected to the beach at Garriri/Rocky Bay through songs gifted to her by her father, the renowned artist Mungurrawuy Yunupingu. Her painting refers to the Djulpan, a group of Yirritja spirit women who are a constellation widely known as the Pleiades. These are the Seven Sisters, who come together to gather food. They then retreat over the northern horizon to their homes. If fires are lit before these celestial movements take place, the Djulpan become sad and cry, as is evident in this painting.



Discussion questions

- Observe this imposing painting and note the rough edges, surface texture and scale. Consider the process necessary to create such a large-scale bark painting. Discuss how you think it was made. How does its scale communicate the immensity of this artist's subject? Does the bark's undulating surface affect your experience of the designs?
- Closely study the fields of dots, linework and cruciform designs. How does the artist's use of colour suggest the night sky? Discuss how pattern, repetition and subtle variations of line, colour and pattern density create a mesmerising effect, evoking energy that suggests the sentience of the universe. Consider the powerful and beautiful image of the stars crying. Using evidence from the artwork, discuss how this idea is expressed.

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