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Recollections: Australian Connections, Collaborations, and Collections in the Sepik Re- gion of Papua New Guinea, 1960s–1970s

Abstract

This paper traces collecting practices and field research in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea during the 1960s and 1970s, when there was heightened interest in the cultural heritage of Papua New Guineans in Australia. It begins with William Dargie, chairman of the Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board, who went to the Sepik in 1968–69. It then investigates the collecting activities of several other Australians working in the Sepik region at that time: Robert MacLennan, Helen and Paul Dennett, and Percy and Renata Cochrane. The paper also discusses exhibitions and collaborative projects that have arisen from these collections and field trips, signalling that a wealth of information remains to be discovered by researchers examining these archives.

Keywords: *Sepik art, Kambot art, Abelam art, art collections, art collectors, Papua New Guinea, Territory of Papua and New Guinea, Australian National Gallery, Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery*

Introduction

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, successive Australian governments progressively prioritised autonomy for the Territory of Papua and New Guinea (TPNG), which gained its independence as the nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG) on September 15, 1975.¹ Under the conservative coalition governments of prime ministers John Gorton and William “Billy” McMahon, the Australian administration oversaw the development of an internal political system of village councils, the debut of the House of Assembly in 1964, and infrastructural improvements in communication networks, health services, schools, and higher education. As prime minister from 1972 to 1975, the Labour leader Gough Whitlam accelerated progress of political institutions, granting self-governance to PNG in 1973 and independence in 1975.

In tandem with these political movements, there was heightened interest in

the cultural heritage of Papua New Guineans within Australia. In 1966, the Lindsay Report on the foundation of the Australian National Gallery (ANG) strongly recommended the development of a comprehensive collection of Oceanic art, especially Melanesian art, as one of its priority areas. The Lindsay Report made particular recommendations for the ANG to distinguish itself among the world's art museums:

2.10 The Committee feels that a unique opportunity exists to establish within the Gallery's collections special provisions for work associated with Australia's geographical and historical position. Specifically, there is no art gallery in the country with the responsibility of acquiring works of art representing the high cultural achievement of Australia's neighbours.²

The Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board (CAAB) was formed at Federation in 1901 to advise the prime minister's department on acquisitions for the national collection. Members of the CAAB were artists of renown. Its scope of responsibilities grew over the years to include negotiations for international exhibitions and the formation of a collection of Australian fine art for a future national gallery.³ Following the Lindsay Report, the CAAB was to be the responsible body for the formation of a Melanesian art collection: "The Board agreed that although it had come rather late to this field, every effort should be made to ensure the Melanesian Collection was one of the showpieces of the new Gallery."⁴

The eminent Australian artist Sir William Dargie, who was chair of the CAAB between 1968 and 1973, accepted the challenge of forming the Melanesian collection. Once the CAAB committed to acquiring this collection, it was decided that a significant part would be commissioned directly from living artists by Dargie and the appointed Ethnic Art Field Agents. Ethically provenanced pieces were also acquired from art galleries and private collections. The CAAB field collection inevitably linked the interests of the ANG and the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery (hereafter, PNG Museum) when they were both at a foundational stage. Due to the imminent change in the political relationship between Australia and PNG when the latter transitioned to an independent nation, the CAAB established ethical collection policies and procedures from the outset. In 1970, it further emphasised the principles of shared responsibility and cultural equity when Australia adopted the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property, condemning looting and illicit trafficking.⁵

This paper recapitulates some of my previous research on the CAAB collection formed by Dargie and his team of ethnic art field collectors in PNG.⁶ Although they collected in other provinces of PNG and in Vanuatu,⁷ the discussion in this paper is restricted to Dargie's collecting activities in the Sepik region, where he went on field trips in 1968 and 1969. I also investigate the collection activities of several other Australians working in the Sepik region in the 1960s and 1970s. In the course of their duties and activities, each of them had prolonged contact with and sustained interest in Sepik communities and their cultural productions. Their professional activities served the interests of Papua New Guineans by introducing new materials for artistic expression and inter-cultural communication. Mutual trust and respect, as well as shared interest in the outcomes, were essential to achieve results. These outcomes included producing and selling art outside of the community and recording music and songs for radio broadcasts.

From 1960 to 1975, the Australian administration governed the Territory of Papua New Guinea. During this period, a number of individual Australian expatriates in diverse professional capacities worked in the Sepik region, both for long stretches and intermittently, and were known to each other: medical doctor Robert MacLennan, schoolteachers Helen and Paul Dennett, and district officer Mike Cockburn. In addition were my parents: Percy Cochrane, head of the TPNG administration's network of radio stations, and Renata Cochrane, the TPNG administration's film unit and publications officer. Each of these individuals documented materials related to their respective interests that they collected in the field and compiled the results of their activities into publications and/or archives. MacLennan, Cockburn, Helen Dennett, Percy Cochrane, and Renata Cochrane had consistent working relationships with Papua New Guineans. Connections and collaborations were inevitable, not just because of difficulties of access and scant resources, but also due to shared interests and relationships with Sepik artists and communities.

With only a small community of expatriates working in remote Sepik communities, there was bound to be contact with any visitors to the Sepik, including Dargie, as noted in my earlier essay on Dargie's collecting activities for the CAAB.⁸ However, it was not because of any connection with Dargie that the Australian collectors discussed here are of interest. Rather, it is their own carefully documented fieldwork, resulting from their diverse occupations, which provides insights into Sepik art and artists during the 1960s and 1970s. The last section of this paper concerns my inter-generational professional interest and curatorial activity. Growing up in PNG from the 1950s to 1970s, I was exposed to my parents' activities at work and in the field. With my mother, I compiled the Percy and Renata Cochrane PNG Collection now deposited at the University of Wollongong, NSW,

Australia. In addition to my childhood journeys, as my own curatorial career developed from the late 1980s, I frequently travelled to PNG to undertake fieldwork for exhibitions and publications and to acquire materials for public institutions. Relevant here is my shared research interest with Robert MacLennan between 2008 and 2010, when we were collaborating on an exhibition project focused on his and Anthony Forge's collections of works on paper from the late 1950s to 1970s. Unfortunately, the proposed exhibition never eventuated. In 2010, the Campbelltown Regional Gallery commissioned me to undertake the Sepik River Project, which I discuss below. I took the opportunity to return albums of photographs and catalogues from my parents' archive to the Sepik communities of Aibom and Kanganaman. At the same time, Helen Dennett entrusted me to return her photograph albums of Kambot artists and their art to Kambot communities. The Sepik River Project of 2010 also enabled the collection of a new set of works on paper depicting the creation ancestors represented on the facade of their *haus tambaran* (spirit house). Some of the Kambot artists still living, including Ignaus Keram and Zacharias Waybenang, were among Dennett's chief collaborators in drawing and print-making projects in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹

Sir William Dargie and the CAAB Collection, 1968–73

Dargie's initial connection with PNG was as an official war artist during World War II. By the 1960s, he was recognised as an eminent Australian artist and was an eight-time winner of the national portrait award, the Archibald Prize. He became chair of the CAAB in 1969, taking over from Sir Daryl Lindsay, and was knighted in 1970. He admired Melanesian art and strongly supported the arguments for its aesthetic value. Due to his position, Dargie had numerous contacts within the colonial hierarchy. At the time, his son Roger was working as a patrol officer in New Britain.

In the interest of ethical collecting, it was necessary to have not only the commonwealth government's approval and funds for the intended Melanesian art collection for the ANG, but also the approval of the territory's administrator. Sir Alan Mann, chief justice and chairman of the trustees of the Public Museum of TPNG, affirmed that the CAAB, pending the establishment of a council for the national gallery, would come within the range of high-standing institutes permitted to export works of art, provided, of course, they were not required for the territory to expand its own museum.¹⁰

One of the major works Dargie commissioned for the CAAB collection was the entire sixty-foot-high facade of a *korombu* (the Abelam name for their *haus tambaran*, or spirit house) attributed to the senior artists Gunjel and Waiam of Kalabu No 2 village. Following his trips to PNG of 1968 and 1969, Dargie was faced with the growing responsibilities of overseeing not only the acquisition, but also the packing, transport, and conservation of the collection, including the *korombu* facade which, despite considerable logistical difficulties, made it to Canberra. Dargie realised that new strategies would have to be implemented and specialists employed if the CAAB was to achieve its objective of acquiring a great Melanesian art collection by the time the national gallery opened. In 1970, Graham Pretty, then curator of anthropology and archaeology at the South Australian Museum, was asked by the CAAB to appraise the Melanesian collections belonging to the Commonwealth government (including Dargie's acquisitions), to identify gaps in the collection, and to consider any issues related to the acquisitions, as well as difficulties of transportation, storage, and conservation of the collection. The collection strategy Pretty outlined, based on a network of field agents, was rapidly adopted by the CAAB, with Pretty appointed as the first ethnic art field agent.

In his report, Pretty stressed that whether acquiring artworks from dealers or commissioning them directly from leading artists, ethical collecting practices should be implemented. From his experience appraising the collections that were being reviewed for the foundation of the PNG Museum in 1968, Pretty was aware that the Ordinance for the Protection of National Cultural Property was being flaunted and this issue was the cause of much local concern. He indicated that it was time for TPNG to develop its own national collections due to rising awareness of the importance of safeguarding cultural property. He also warned that, in response to the insatiable appetite of traffickers and tourists, the territory's administration was likely to place more restrictive ordinances on the export of cultural property in the near future.¹¹

Over several years, the CAAB made a number of purchases of Melanesian art from the Stephen Kellner Gallery. In negotiations over certain objects being considered for acquisition, Pretty wrote to Kellner on September 3, 1971:

Dear Stephen,

I think that for a figure of this magnitude any prospective purchaser could reasonably expect you, the present vendor, to supply the full history for each item. That covers the following:

- a) precise locality of origin;
- b) date of its acquisition from that locality;

- c) the name of the man or persons it was bought from and the knowledge of its age, maker and significant stories about it, etc.;
- d) history of its subsequent ownership;
- e) name of its vendor . . .

I must have that information. It is the dealer's responsibility to find this data and pass it on that guarantees a dealer my respect of him and his interests . . .

This secretiveness among curio hunters is perplexing and discredits them as useful agents for galleries and museums. I don't need to remind you that it is the main reason behind all the moves from several quarters in New Guinea to place a ban on all collecting by outsiders.¹²

From the start of his own collecting trips in 1968, Dargie had been warned by Sir Alan Mann, chair of the board of trustees of the PNG Museum in Port Moresby, of increasing local sensitivities regarding the protection of PNG's national cultural property. Despite all the policies and procedures for ethical collecting negotiated by Dargie and Pretty for the CAAB's collection, Dirk Smidt, the director of the PNG Museum, and members of the museum's board raised questions over whose interests took priority: Australia's or Papua New Guinea's. There had been some scandalous incidents of unscrupulous dealers flaunting the Cultural Property Act.¹³ Following discussions in May 1972 with Smidt and others concerned with the discrepancy between the chronically underfunded PNG Museum and the "no expense spared" actions taken for Australia's national gallery, one of the ethnic arts field agents, Barry Craig, alerted the CAAB: "It is apparent that the time is near when NO FURTHER export of traditional artefacts and art objects will be allowed. Already indigenous politicians are giving thought to such regulations."¹⁴

The trustees of the newly renamed PNG National Museum and Art Gallery were now adamant about its duty to safeguard the country's heritage, especially valued items of movable cultural property, from the predations of collectors. This mirrored the sudden change in the power relationship between Australia and Papua New Guinea, with the acceleration towards PNG's independence following the election of Whitlam's Labour Government in 1972. Smidt issued a document, "Proposed Procedures for the CAAB Research and Collecting Activities in Papua New Guinea," which contained criticisms of the CAAB's collecting activities and insisted that Australia provide collections, documentation, and facilities for the

PNG Museum as part of the field collecting activities. It also underscored the difference in the facilities and resources allocated to the local institution by the Australian government, in comparison to Australia's national gallery.

In January 1973, the CAAB's collecting activities were destabilised by Gough Whitlam's radical policy change, which abjured Australia's interests in forming a Melanesian collection in favour of PNG obtaining Australia's recent field collections as part of a five-million-dollar cultural gift to PNG. In January 1973, what Pretty called a "sort of chaotic purge" occurred due to the restructuring of Australia's bureaucracy and arts agencies by the Whitlam government. Dargie resigned in protest and the CAAB was disbanded, with the Australia Council for the Arts taking over its role.

Although the work of the ethnic art field agents in conducting surveys, collecting, and commissioning art came to an abrupt end in 1973, it is demonstrable that Prett's system established a sound philosophical basis and workable model for encouraging the continuation of traditional art practices with their associated ceremony, while at the same time providing a viable source of high quality artworks for museum collections and the international art market.

Dargie's acquisitions, which had already arrived in Australia, went into storage in Canberra because the then-director of ANG, James Mollison, did not share Dargie's enthusiasm for Melanesian art. Belatedly, in the 1990s, under the directorship of Ron Radford, the National Gallery of Australia (the name was changed from ANG in 1980) decided to have a dedicated Pacific gallery. Included in its initial displays in 2008 were some spectacular pieces from the collection of the defunct CAAB. Remembering that in 1969, Mike Cockburn, the district officer in the East Sepik area, had organised the complex logistics for a collecting trip by Dargie, I wondered if pieces from this trip would finally be displayed. The NGA's Pacific curator, Crispin Howarth, confirmed that the ancestral figures and pig sculpture that appear in one of Mike Cockburn's photos of the interior of an Abelam *korombu* were those he collected for Dargie: "Yes, this image is of the Abelam ensemble that Mike Cockburn acquired for Dargie. I had them all out on display two years ago and followed the field photograph for positioning."¹⁵ The works were included in the exhibition *Gods, Ghosts, and Men: Pacific Arts from the National Gallery of Australia* (October 10, 2008–January 11, 2009), which acknowledged that this was "the first major exhibition of Pacific art to be held in Australia for nearly twenty years. Many of the works . . . have never before been seen by the Australian public."¹⁶

Australian Connections, Collaborations, and Collections

My focus now turns to the group of Australians working in the Sepik in diverse occupations during the 1960s and 1970s. These individuals were known to each other, whether as close associates or as occasional collaborators. All maintained a lifelong interest in the Sepik communities they frequented while working in the Sepik region. Each person had some special interest, whether in art or music, beyond the practice of their respective professions, with the artists and communities with which they engaged. In accordance with their particular skills and interests, these Australians took photographs, made recordings, collected drawings and made art prints with the agreement of the creators. Their activities supported the interests of the artists of Sepik communities, and the outcomes, such as sets of photographs, or art prints by Kambot artists and money earned from sales, or music recorded in their village played on radio. All these collectors recognised that, for the Sepik communities with which they engaged, artistic productions were an integral part of an active ceremonial and secular life.

Even after some of these Australians retired from their professions, their interest in PNG art and culture continued. For example, my parents, Percy and Renata Cochrane, donated their PNG collection to the University of Wollongong, and MacLennan digitised Percy Cochrane's music recordings, which had originally been made on reel-to-reel magnetic tapes. In 2010, I travelled to several Sepik communities and to Kambot and liaised with Helen Dennett as she prepared sets of photo albums to return to the Kambot artists she had worked closely with in the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s, when the Australia–PNG relationship segued into the postcolonial era, my parents, like many other Australian expatriates, felt that Australia and Australians had lost interest in Papua New Guinea, and their life's work was devalued in the upsurge of post-colonial theory.

Robert MacLennan

The British anthropologist Anthony Forge is renowned for his innovative scholarship on art and aesthetics among the Abelam people of the Sepik region, based on his fieldwork from 1958 to 1963. His work was influential in the paradigm shift in the anthropology of art during the 1960s and 1970s, raising issues of style, meaning, social significance, and aesthetic value.¹⁷ Forge formed major collections for the Museum der Kulturen in Basel. Relevant to this essay are his collections of



Figure 1. Colour photo prints of paintings in natural pigments on paper from the set Robert MacLennan obtained at Pukago. Images numbered (clockwise from upper left): RM DSCF0913; RM DSCF0916; RM DSCF0845; RM DSCF0841. Mandeville Department of Special Collections, University of California San Diego. Images courtesy of Robert MacLennan

works on paper housed in several university art museums in the United States; these are discussed in relation to MacLennan's fieldwork and collections.

Forge and medical doctor Robert MacLennan had close and long-lasting collaborations. MacLennan learned from Forge what would be of interest to anthropologists and museum collections. They continued corresponding on their common interests well after Forge became Foundation Professor of Anthropology at the Australian National University in 1974, and until his death in 1991. MacLennan's photographs detail the panoply of Sepik art on all surfaces, and are complemented by his field recordings of songs and music. He followed Forge's methodology of systematically collecting sets of works on paper depicting the ancestor heroes and clan designs painted on spirit houses (Fig. 1).

Painting in natural pigments occurs on all two- and three-dimensional Abelam ritual and ceremonial objects, as well as on the body. MacLennan's photographs show Abelam initiates with dramatically painted faces performing and embodying ancestors (Fig. 2). All of the figures in the interior of the *korambo* are embellished with human features and the palette of natural colours—yellow, red, black, and white.



Figure 2. *Korambo* at Kalabu Nyambak, Eastern Abelam, during the performance of a *Nggwal puti* initiation, 1962. Dargie visited this village and the *korambo* is similar to the one he commissioned. Photograph by Robert MacLennan. Courtesy of Robert MacLennan¹⁸

In 2007, during his retirement, MacLennan revisited the United States to re-locate and re-examine his own and Forge's collections of Sepik paintings on paper. Between 2007 and 2010, I collaborated with MacLennan on an exhibition project to draw attention to his and Forge's collections of works on paper.¹⁹ Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris, a scholar at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, assisted with locating the Forge and MacLennan collections of works on paper in support of the proposed exhibition. She confirmed that the Southern Illinois University (SIU) at Carbondale held thirty-three paintings that MacLennan had collected and donated to the SIU University Museum during Phillip J. C. Dark's tenure there. She added that "there is a collection of his in the Salem Museum (Abelam), which has been there on long-term loan, and another in Southern Illinois University which are FANTASTIC."²⁰

MacLennan enumerated in detail the series of works on paper that Forge had collected, and deposited at the University of California San Diego. In particular he commented on the fourth sub-series, "Abelam Artwork":

These paintings were created in a group of villages in the North Wosera area and are said to represent all of the traditional designs known to every artist in the area at that time. The designs were executed on black or dark grey paper corresponding to the two colours of mud surfaces used by the Abelam and corresponding size to the sago-spathe panels traditionally used. The artists used black, white, red, and yellow ochre tempera colours corresponding to the earth pigments traditionally used. The paint was applied using traditional brushes. Also included in this series are colour charcoal drawings and ink drawings.²¹

MacLennan said of his own collection of paintings on paper from the Abelam village of Pukago that the men were keen to engage in the activity when he proposed it. As no *korambo* had been constructed in their village for many years, painting their ancestors and clan designs on paper presented an important opportunity for the initiated men to produce an entire set of the paintings for the facade as a physical affirmation of their intangible cultural heritage. For the elders who retained the knowledge, this activity was a means of transmitting it to younger men.

Helen Dennett—Kambot Works on Paper

In the early 1960s, Helen and Paul Dennett commenced their careers as schoolteachers in the Sepik region. In 1973, they moved to the government station at Angoram, which lies on the confluence of the Sepik and Keram Rivers. Several tributaries flow to the lower Sepik, and each is associated with a distinctive artistic style. Initiated Kambot men in village communities alongside the Keram River decorate their ceremonial houses with sculptures and complex sequences of paintings. The long, horizontal gables are filled with painted compositions of the ancestral heroes Mopul and Wain with totemic animals and legendary figures. Ancestor figures are surrounded by a constellation of motifs—birds, crocodiles, the sun, the moon, and stars. These sequences of paintings are made on sago-spathe panels using natural pigments.

Helen Dennett's interest and engagement with Kambot artists began with the inventive carvings of "storyboards" being made by Zacharias Waybenang and his brother, Ignas Keram, of Kambot. She provided them with paper and pencils to take back to their village. When they returned with a collection of drawings, she was particularly impressed by the work of Simon Nowep. She travelled down the Keram River, where Nowep produced a number of drawings from which Dennett produced the first series of monotone prints of his work.

Over the next several years, Dennett compiled collections of drawings of all the dominant ancestral figures, including Mopul and Wain, as well as designs associated with the bird-headed figures from the legend of Lawena and Dawena. The Kambot artists she collected from included Simon Nowep, Zacharias Weybenang, and Ignas Keram. She supplied the artists with new art materials, black paper, and white crayons to experiment with. In the 1960s, and even today, it is not unusual for PNG people in remote areas to have rarely used paints and paper except at school, and as school fees are high, many children have minimal schooling. Beyond Wewak (the provincial capital on the coast), there are no shops supplying even basic art materials such as art paper, canvas, and acrylic paints, making access to introduced art materials very limited.



Figure 3. Left and center: Kambot artists Zacharias Waybenang and Ignas Keram painting works on paper for the Sepik Project, 2010. Right: Hubert Yambin curating the order of the artworks. Photographs by Susan Cochrane. Courtesy of the artists

Appreciating the compelling imagery depicted by Kambot artists on their works on paper, Dennett made limited-edition prints of them, so the artists could gain income from sales of their art. She was well aware that, since the late 1960s, Ulli and Georgina Beier had mentored a number of artists, notably Akis and Kauge, and initiated exhibitions and the production of limited-edition prints in Port Moresby, the capital of PNG.²² The Kambot art prints found a ready market among the expatriate community in Port Moresby, especially as they were relatively inexpensive, easy to transport, and did not require export permits. As another way of increasing knowledge about this new form of Kambot art, in 1975, Helen and Paul Dennett published an excellent reference book on their research and collections, *Mak Bilong Sepik*.²³ The British Museum and the Australian Museum acquired works on paper by Kambot artists who were promoted by the Dennetts. More recently, in 2017 the Queensland Art Gallery—Gallery of Modern Art acquired Kambot artworks from Dennett.²⁴

Drawings and prints by Papua New Guinea artists, including the Kambot artists, were significant in the emergence of contemporary art expressions by PNG artists more broadly in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, Port Moresby was undergoing a period of rapid urban growth. Architects and urban planners involved in the construction of buildings defining the character of the emerging nation—such as the Parliament House, the University, the National Bank, and the Catholic Cathedral—incorporated original artworks of Papua New Guinean artists into these buildings.²⁵ Helen Dennett used her network of contacts to promote

Kambot artists in this milieu. In 1971, on his visit to Kambot, the director of the PNG Museum, Dirk Smidt, commissioned Nowep to paint a *haus tambaran* facade featuring Mopul, the paramount ancestor figure of Kambot, for the future PNG National Museum. This image inspired the facade of the current museum building, which opened in 1977.²⁶

Percy and Renata Cochrane

In 1960, PNG had a population of nearly four million people, the vast majority living in microsocieties with very little or no knowledge of their compatriots outside their traditional alliances and trading networks. The PNG administration's objective was to create awareness across all media of coexistence and common purpose among the Indigenous people of this emerging nation.

My parents, Percy and Renata Cochrane, lived in PNG from 1949 to 1970 and raised their three children there. They were both public servants employed by the TPNG's administration. Percy specialised in radio broadcasting; he devised programs to reach the widest possible audience throughout PNG. From the 1950s, radio was recognised as the most cost-efficient and effective means of communication in PNG, especially given the rugged terrain and multiple small-scale societies, with some 800 languages spoken. In hindsight, radio was influential in the rapid spread of the vernacular Tok Pisin, and an essential vehicle for conveying government news and educational content. PNG reporters and presenters were trained to broadcast in local languages with local content for the government. From the mid-1960s, as chief of the broadcasts division, Percy implemented a chain of radio stations. An amateur ethnomusicologist, he frequently went on "radio patrol" in Sepik communities to record music and ceremonies to use as example recordings for Radio Wewak.

Renata Cochrane was employed as a publications officer in the government's Department of Information and Extension Services, producing newsletters and publications for distribution to local audiences throughout PNG and, later, writing scripts and acting as producer for the department's film unit.²⁷ In their free time, both Percy and Renata wrote books in simplified English for adult literacy, and encouraged several of the radio reporters to write and publish their stories and poetry, including Allan Natachee, who was heralded as the first Papuan poet. For several years, Renata also wrote a topical column, "What Do You Think?," for the PNG *Post Courier*.

As the pace towards PNG self-governance accelerated, the need for effective communications increased. As the chain of radio stations grew, so did the distribution of transistor radios through the patrol network. The demand for local news and music necessitated frequent “radio patrols” to negotiate approved content with village elders. Hearing themselves on radio broadcasts was a source of cultural pride for people living in remote villages—far more appreciated than pop music or BBC news. Recordings on reel-to-reel magnetic tape were made in village communities, incorporated into programs, and broadcast on local stations, such as Radio Wewak for the Sepik region.

Throughout PNG, literacy rates were very low, but communication at the village level was essential. In addition to radio broadcasts in local languages, newsletters and readers with high visual content and documentary films about PNG for local audiences were produced on an increasing scale. Renata Cochrane wrote some twenty film scripts, often gathering material for them on location in order to work more closely with informants and encourage their participation.

Even into the 1970s, the Department of Information had only one staff photographer and one film director. There was a constant need for photography for use in the newsletters such as the Tok Pisin weekly *Yumi Nau (All of Us Today)*. Like MacLennan, Cockburn, and Helen Dennett, the Cochranes always had their cameras and the essential rolls of film with them. Supplies of film and recording tapes had to be maintained as they would be unobtainable in the field.

Due to the constant lack of resources and personnel, when on school holidays the Cochrane’s teenage daughters were sometimes commandeered to be “gofers,” assisting the film crew and keeping curious children off the film set. For example, when I was fifteen years old, I went with my mother to the Sepik village of Aibom on the Chambri Lakes for the filming of *Women of Aibom (1965)*, about women potters. Once completed, they screened the short documentary films on a sheet hung in the village grounds or showed them in village schools and missions.

Even in Port Moresby, resources were rudimentary. Administration offices were concentrated in wartime Quonset huts at Konedobu, with practically no storage or comforts like air-conditioning. Once, upon returning from a long service leave, my father found that his precious collection of music master tapes, which he stored in a special locked filing cabinet in his office, was missing. He had been safe-keeping the recordings until the university or national archives had archival storage space built and was furious to find that an associate had taken about fifty tapes and wiped them to record news stories. Luckily, he had kept another almost complete set at home.

As there were no film development shops in PNG, my parents sent all their

rolls of film to Australia for processing. When the precious yellow boxes of colour slides came back, there would be a much-anticipated slide show at home, and the best images would be used for publications. All the slides were carefully annotated on their paper frames and kept in old cardboard suitcases under our beds.

In addition to my parents, I had some professional interest and personal involvement with these Australian collectors. Growing up in TPNG during the 1950s to 1970s, I was exposed to my parents' activities at work and in the field. Throughout my career as a researcher and curator of contemporary Pacific art from the 1980s to the 2010s, I returned to PNG on numerous occasions, and specifically to the Sepik region, for several curatorial projects. Most relevant to this paper are my connections with Robert MacLennan and Helen Dennett. In 2007, while I was a research fellow at the University of Queensland, I met again with "Bob" MacLennan, who had been a friend of my parents.

In 2010, I was commissioned to undertake the Sepik River Project, part of the ambitious *River Project*, an international, multi-arts event and exhibition initiated by the Campbelltown Arts Centre (CAC) in Sydney, Australia.²⁸ The scope of the Sepik River Project required me to undertake a field trip upriver from Wewak to the mid-Sepik region and then to Kambot with Port Moresby-based contemporary PNG artist and co-curator Jeffrey Feeger.



Figure 4. Kawa Gita (Korogo Village, Iatmul people) painting a work entitled *Mariman (Bride Price)* using earth pigments on sago spathe, 2010. Photo Susan Cochrane. Courtesy of the artist

On this trip we commissioned Sepik artists to make a small collection of paintings of ancestral beings related to the *mariman* (bride price) using earth pigments on sago spathe (Fig. 4); Kambot artists to make works on paper; and Jeffry Feeger to make portraits of several of the artists we encountered on our journey (Fig. 5).²⁹ Among my preparations for the trip, I made copies of photographs and documents from my parents' collection, catalogues from the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, and Helen Dennett's albums of photographs to return to the Kambot artists she had worked with in the 1970s, as noted above. I travelled to Kambot, where the artists were delighted to receive these gifts for those still living and for the families of deceased artists. The albums of photos prepared by Helen Dennett immediately created a stir of great interest and genuine appreciation.



Figure 5. Jeffry Feeger with his Sepik portraits of (left to right) Tony Kumbui, Kawa Gita, and Zacharias Waybenang. Photograph by Susan Cochrane. Courtesy of the artist

This was also the opportunity for the Kambot artists to create a new series of works on paper depicting legendary heroes and creation stories. This suite of works is directly related to the collections made by Dennett in the 1970s; some of the same artists were active participants in the 2010 series. It had been more than fifteen years since her last visit to Kambot, which was the last time the artists had been given Western art materials to use. Through the good offices of Materina Wai, we had sent art materials ahead to Kambot. We arrived at Kambot village to find a painting session in full swing, with senior artists Zacharias Waybenang, Ignas Keram, and Hubert Yambin sitting in groups with their sons and other younger artists, all painting on the black canvas and black and white paper we had supplied.³⁰ Although Cochrane had brought tubes of acrylic paints in a range of colours, the Kambot artists preferred to restrict their palettes to white, black, red, and a touch of yellow ochre. Within two days, the artists produced some thirty

paintings and drawings of Kambot ancestral stories of Mobul and the twin sisters Lawena and Dawena; Hubert Yambin laid out the sequence of paintings for us to adhere to when they were displayed in the exhibition (Figs. 3 and 6).



Figure 6. Installation of Kambot works on paper in the Sepik River Project (detail), *River Project*, Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2010. The configuration follows Hubert Yambin's layout (see Fig. 3). Photograph by Susan Cochrane. Courtesy of the artists and Campbelltown Arts Centre

While the Kambot artists were absorbed in creating their works, Feeger made pencil portraits of the individuals involved. The Kambot artists and Feeger had never previously experienced the other's art practice, and there was genuine interest and appreciation all around.

Through its "recollections," this paper has endeavoured to use a more "up close and personal" lens to recount the experience of several Australian collectors in the Sepik region in the 1960s to 1970s. A wealth of information based on lived experience remains to be discovered by researchers examining their archives, which are replete with original artworks, photographs, documents, recordings, and other material.

Susan Cochrane has achieved recognition as a specialist on the Indigenous art of the Pacific region. Her formative years in Papua New Guinea influenced her career path as an art historian, curator, and writer. Frequent fieldwork in Pacific countries has contributed to her long-term professional relationships with Indigenous artists and communities. Her innovative curatorial approach has led to roles as guest curator of or consultant on major exhibitions and art events in Australia. Internationally, she has been a consultant to the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia and Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts in Taiwan on several occasions. She has published extensively on contemporary Pacific art and regards writing for diverse publications as an indispensable component to making Pacific art accessible to a wide audience.

Notes

¹ Officially the country was the Territory of Papua and New Guinea (TPNG) until the date of independence. However, to avoid confusion I use its sovereign name, Papua New Guinea (PNG).

² Sir Daryl Lindsay, *Report of the National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry* (Canberra: Prime Minister's Department, 1966), 12.

³ The Australian National Gallery's name was changed to the National Gallery of Australia in 1980. It was known as the Australian National Gallery during the period under review here.

⁴ CAAB Minutes, December 3–4, 1969, Item 18, 9. Papers of Sir William Dargie, MS No. 7752, National Library of Australia.

⁵ Some pieces acquired by John Friede had dubious provenance and were subject to approval under PNG regulations prior to inclusion in the Jolika Collection at the de Young Museum, San Francisco. Christina Hellmich, "Carving the Story: Recovering Histories of Sepik Art in the Jolika Collection," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 148 (2018): 97–105.

⁶ Papers of Sir William Dargie, MS No. 7752, National Library of Australia.

⁷ The CAAB's team of ethnic arts field agents in PNG were Australian anthropologists Graham Pretty, Barry Craig, and Tony Crawford. See Susan Cochrane, "Mr Pretty's Predicament: Ethnic Art Field Collectors in Melanesia for the Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board, 1968–1973," in *Hunting the Collectors: Pacific Collections in Australian Museums, Art Galleries and Archives*, ed. S. Cochrane and M. Quanchi (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 243–74.

⁸ "Arrangements were through political channels from the Prime Minister's office to the Administrator, David Osborne Hay, who then provided contacts with district officers and private individuals known to have an interest in 'native art and artefacts.'" Cochrane, "Mr Pretty's Predicament," 249.

⁹ Susan Cochrane, "Sepik Journey," in *The River Project* (Campbelltown, NSW: Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2010), 94–114.

¹⁰ Correspondence from W. R. Cumming (Prime Minister's Department), December 14, 1967; Dargie to D. O. Hay, December 12, 1967; J. F. Donovan (Department of Territories) to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, November 20, 1967, concerning arrangements for Dargie's visit. Papers of Sir William Dargie, MS 7752, series 12, box 9, folder 6, National Library of Australia.

¹¹ Graham L. Pretty, "Report on the Commonwealth Collection of Primitive Art from New Guinea and the Pacific Islands" (Canberra: CAAB, 1970).

¹² Extract of a letter from G. Pretty to Stephen Kellner, September 3, 1971. Typescript, Pretty Files, South Australian Museum.

¹³ Unscrupulous collectors flaunting the provisions of the Cultural Property Ordinance came to a head in 1972. The minutes of the trustees' meeting of July 14, 1972, reported the seizure of artefacts from dealers Barry Hoare and Rudi Caesar. Hoare's shop in Madang was sealed and valuable artefacts in the category of national cultural property were found in a secret room. Artefacts were also confiscated from Caesar's house. Dirk Smidt, the director of the museum, requested the seizure of artefacts about to be exported by a US citizen, Mrs Lynda Ridgeway. The consignments were seized under the Customs Ordinance and National Cultural Property Ordinance; the artefacts seized had no export permit and were packed in cartons marked "household effects." A list of items judged national cultural property was appended to the agenda for the trustees meeting held October 9, 1972. Papers of Sir William Dargie, MS 7752, series 12, box 19, folder 6, National Library of Australia.

¹⁴ Extract of a letter from B. Craig to the CAAB, May 27, 1972. Papers of Sir William Dargie, MS 7752, series 12, box 19, folder 1, National Library of Australia.

¹⁵ Crispin Howarth, e-mail message to author, October 10, 2008.

¹⁶ National Gallery, Australia, *Gods, Ghosts, and Men: Pacific Arts from the National Gallery of Australia*, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://nga.gov.au/exhibitions/gods-ghosts-and-men/>.

¹⁷ See "Anthony Forge Papers," Special Collections and Archives, University of California San Diego, https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf6w1008pf/entire_text/. Box 6, folders 7–8, and box 9, folders 1–8, contain Abelam works on paper. Among Forge's seminal works on the anthropology of art is "Style and Meaning in Sepik Art," in *Primitive Art and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

¹⁸ MacLennan's description of this photograph reads, "Initiating *ara* (moiety) have entered the *amei* (hamlet's ceremonial ground) and are parading anti-clockwise. Lime has been rubbed on by spectators in recognition of the excellence of their decorations which are completely traditional with the exception of one youth who has shorts. The others are completely naked as the Abelam were on first Australian contact. Their eyes are covered with yellow paint. They are the *nggwal* ancestor spirits that are also represented in the lowest row of the façade above wooden carved *tikit*."

¹⁹ Despite our joint efforts, the exhibition did not materialise.

²⁰ Dr. J. A. Lewis-Harris, director of the Connecting Human Origin and Cultural Diversity Program, University of Missouri—St. Louis, email to the author, May 10, 2010.

²¹ Robert MacLennan, e-mail to the author, October 13, 2010. The email reads, in part: “The Special Collections of the Mandeville library of the University of California San Diego has a register of Anthony Forge academic output – MSS 0411. It appears that the original paintings are not in the library, only colour photo-prints. My collection in Pukago was also analysed and has colour prints in MSS 0411. Abelam Artwork, the fourth sub-series, contains 363 original paintings and drawings by Abelam artists, commissioned by Forge on his second trip to Papua New Guinea, 1962–1963. The majority of the paintings are arranged numerically according to assigned numbers on the verso of each piece, 1–262 (missing numbers include 53, 231, 234, 237, 239, 242, 243). The production of this group of paintings was documented by Forge in notebooks contained in series 3B and photographs located in sub-series 5A and 5D. Forge also analysed this Abelam artwork in chapter 10 of his book *Primitive Art and Society*. Miscellaneous numbered paintings follow the first numbered sequence.”

²² Melanie Eastburn, *Papua New Guinea Prints* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2006).

²³ Paul and Helen Dennett, *Mak Bilong Sepik: A Selection of Designs and Paintings from the Sepik River, Papua New Guinea* (Wewak, PNG: Wirui Press, 1975), 24–40, 75–81, 84, 85, 88. These pages include Kambot Village artists’ ancestral legends and their associated images.

²⁴ Ruth McDougall, “Simon Nowep: Maintaining a Place for Spirits,” Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art blog, January 11, 2017, <https://blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/simon-nowep-maintaining-a-place-for-spirits/>.

²⁵ Susan Cochrane, *Contemporary Art in Papua New Guinea* (Sydney: Craftsman House Press, 1997), 105–18.

²⁶ Cochrane, *Contemporary Art in Papua New Guinea*, 105–18.

²⁷ Renata Cochrane and Susan Cochrane assembled the Cochrane Papua New Guinea Collection during 1981–82. It consists of sound recordings, black-and-white photographs, colour slides, manuscripts, correspondence, and publications. See Cochrane Papua New Guinea Collection, D160, University of Wollongong, NSW Australia, <https://archivesonline.uow.edu.au/nodes/view/665>.

²⁸ The *River Project* was a culmination of a three-year cultural and social research program focused on the interface between nature and culture. Directed by Lisa Haviilah and Binghui Huangfu, it was contextualised by artists from Australian, Asian, and Pacific riverine communities. See *The River Project* (Campbelltown, NSW: Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2010), 8–10.

²⁹ Susan Cochrane, “Sepik Journey,” in *The River Project* (Campbelltown, NSW: Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2010), 94–114; and Jeffrey Feeger, “Sepik Field Notes,”

in *The River Project* (Campbelltown, NSW: Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2010), 115–32.

³⁰ Dennett advised us to take black art paper to Kambot village, as the Kambot artists preferred this as a base because traditional paintings on *pangal* are always on a dark surface.