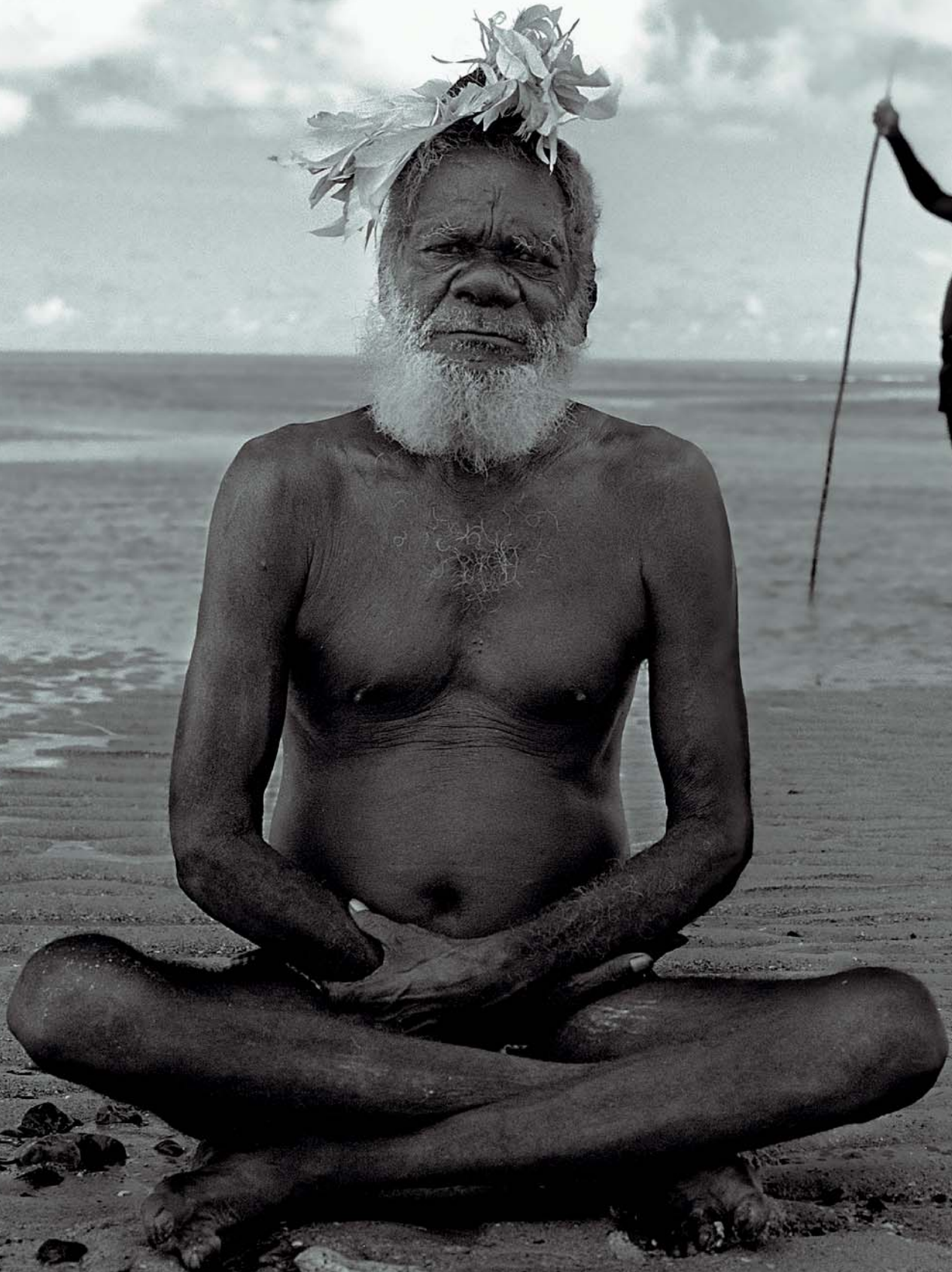


AUSTRALIA

THE VATICAN MUSEUMS INDIGENOUS COLLECTION



ABORIGINAL STUDIES PRESS

EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI

In 2010 I was in the northern part of Western Australia, along with Katherine Aigner travelling with people from the Kimberley region. We had travelled for hours under a relentless sun and along dusty roads that gradually became little more than narrow paths. The landscape was continually changing, from dry patches of red earth to green spaces. We waded through shallow streams, stopping occasionally to rest at some billabongs, the pools of water that dot the Australian landscape. I came across fauna and flora that I had never seen before — kangaroos and crocodiles, boab and melaleuca trees. Finally we reached some rock formations that overlooked the sea. In silence, our friends from the Kimberley pointed to a rock wall where we could see some paintings. And then we saw others, and still others, in a succession of images that seemed to have no end.

Like many before me, I was fascinated by Australia, by its powerful rugged landscape and its vast horizons sparkling with stars at night; by the mysterious sound of the didgeridoo; by its art that expresses the wisdom of a people who for tens of thousands of years have inhabited these lands. As we came close to the images painted under the rock ledges, our friends who are custodians of these sites, called out to the spirits to let them know we were here. From them, and from the Tiwi people of the Tiwi Islands, and from those around New Norcia and other parts of Australia, I learned how important the close relationship between nature, art and spirituality is to understanding the world of the Indigenous Australians. Staying with them, I understood them when they said that for Aboriginal people, painting and the creation of other forms of art is a spiritual experience, or better yet, a way of entering into communion with the spiritual reality that permeates nature and endows it with profound meaning. What at first glance appears to be nothing more than a barren and lifeless landscape is transformed by songs, dances, stories, and art into a living planet.

This realisation filled me with gratitude for the custodians who allowed me the privilege to join them walking along the songlines. Without their help I would have been lost in the outback, so without them the landscape where I was would have remained mute. Instead, thanks to their art and culture, it acquired a voice.

And it was the most beautiful voice.

Every rock, every tree, every mountain and river came to life thanks to the art and culture of the Indigenous Australians, whether the art form was the rock paintings I admired in the Kimberley, or the carved poles and paintings I had seen in the Tiwi Islands, or the other works of art that I marvelled at all over Australia, not only in Aboriginal communities, but also in the galleries of the most prestigious museums.

Including the Vatican Museums.

I had only recently become the Director, and meeting Indigenous Australians from the Kimberley and Tiwi Islands and around Australia was the spark that gave rise to the philosophy of 'reconnection' that still guides the Vatican Ethnological Museum today. With Katherine we have applied it to the study and appreciation of the art and culture of other peoples of the world: in the Americas, Oceania, Africa, and other distant and awe-inspiring locations. Reconnecting with the descendants of those who created the works of art conserved in the Museums of the Pope so that they guide us to hear the voice of these works of art, and, along with their voice, the sound of the streams, the murmuring of prayers, the spirituality or struggles and daily life of the people.



Landscape in Bungle Bungle Range, Purnululu National Park, WA

To discern all these voices, it was not enough to contemplate these works of art or cultural objects. It was necessary to reconnect with real people and come to know and share their struggles to preserve their natural environment from greed and exploitation, from those with an agenda to extract riches from the earth, the waters, and the seas, and who therefore are indifferent to the profound meaning of Songlines. It was necessary to experience and share the struggles of Aboriginal people to preserve their culture and identity in the face of the advance of an increasingly globalised world; to experience and share their open generosity as they invited us into their homes, their communities, and their most noteworthy sites so that we could grasp the importance of preserving them for future generations.

This philosophy of reconnection has been beautifully articulated in the *Australia* catalogue.

The publication of this catalogue was a complex undertaking that began with the study of archival material and of works housed in the storerooms of the museum. Then came the stage that was, humanly speaking, the most moving: reconnecting with the Aboriginal people who are descendants of the artists who created these works. To bring the project to its completion, Katherine had to do meticulous research, almost to the point of becoming a 'detective', in order to reconstruct from the limited information in the archives the path by which these works came to the Vatican, and then to identify the communities in Australia from which they came and the persons related to the artists who created them. Once they had been identified, she personally visited those communities scattered from New Norcia

near Perth, to the Tiwi Islands, and especially to Kalumburu and the various villages of the Kimberley. As I mentioned above, I was privileged to accompany her on some of these reconnecting trips and share the excitement of finding the descendants of those who, more than a century ago, created these works as gifts for the popes, and of now being able to hear their voices and bring them into the Vatican.

Then began the involvement of experts of aboriginal art and culture, both Indigenous and non-indigenous, who brought their voices to this catalogue.

The *Australia* catalogue — along with the permanent exhibition dedicated to Australia — shows just how honored the Vatican Museums are to be the humble curators of this legacy of art and spirituality, and to be open to dialogue with one of the oldest cultures on the planet. For this, we are grateful to the First Australians for sharing their wisdom, art and spirituality with us.

Nicola Mapelli

Head of the Department

Anima Mundi – Peoples, art and cultures

Vatican Museums