

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into the Proliferation of Inauthentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'style' Art

My involvement in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art sector

I am an accountant and auditor and I work extensively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Centres throughout Australia. The Art Centres I work with are constituted as not-for-profit entities; they are required to be audited every year and my involvement is the conduct of those audits which currently extends to over forty Art Centres. I have been so engaged for almost twenty years, visiting remote Communities, examining the Art Centre financial and other records, talking to the artists, directors and management, and providing support and advice. I also work closely with their peak bodies, and with those in Government providing funding and governance oversight.

The effect of having an Art Centre in a Community

You need to actually see an Art Centre at work to appreciate just how important they are to the Communities in which they exist, and how crucial they are to the social and economic fabric of the Community. They take on the functions of everything from banker to travel agent to social worker to careers guidance counsellors. They resemble a house in which an extended family of forty have gathered for the unwrapping of presents on Christmas morning – absolute madness – to the same household mid-afternoon, oldies napping, children quietly playing games or reading books.

Economic impact

The Art Centres are, apart from those located in regional centres, the principal source of income into the Community apart from Government funding; in a sense, they are the equivalent of export oriented businesses in mainstream Australia and apart from tourist activities, which are usually also managed by the Art Centres, there is little or no other income flowing into these Communities.

This income is the lifeblood of the Community. While it is earned from the output of only a handful of people in the Community it is shared and dispersed widely to family and from there to the store and such other small enterprises that might exist; in other words, the bulk of the income that comes into the Community from the sale of art is spent in the Community.

Employment impact

The employment opportunities in Communities are few; Community members with employment will be working at the store, for the Community undertaking maintenance or Community service work, or for a Government department or agency – although most of the latter will be non-Indigenous. For young people the options are bleak. The Art Centre is the only employer which actually provides Community members with interesting, challenging, meaningful and varied work.

Skilling-up impact

Art Centre workers are able to undertake on- and off-the-job training in a regional centre, capital city, or overseas. They are able to learn skills in marketing, finance, information technology,

studio operations and in dealing with 'outside Australia' – skills which they are certainly not going to get working in the store or driving a truck collecting rubbish. The Art Centres also work with young people in the Communities, introducing them to the notion and value of employment and the commitment and discipline employment requires. They also assist them in starting their own micro businesses, ranging from music, to graphic design, fashion and photography – providing support and encouragement, bringing in established artists from other parts of Australia and overseas, and teaching the fundamentals of marketing and finance. Many will take their product and skills to the art fairs of Cairns, Darwin, Alice Springs, Adelaide, Fremantle and elsewhere. They will enter competitions and win prizes, recognition, awards and publicity.

Social and Cultural Impact

The Art Centre is truly a Community resource; it is a place where women can find peace and quiet (relatively speaking and dogs notwithstanding) in sometimes dysfunctional places; where swearing and fighting is not permitted, and where they can work independently or collaboratively, with guidance and help on call.

It is a place where old men and women can share stories and culture with young people, where they can work with children in the Community school, and where tradition is respected and maintained.

It is a place where bush trips to Country are organised and facilitated.

It is a place of dancing and singing.

It is a place where nutritious meals are available, paid for from the artists' own contributions to a lunch fund.

It is a place where a pool of funds might be established to assist the disabled, the frail and the elderly in the Community.

What if there were no Art Centres?

All of the above happens only because the Art Centre exists and thrives.

A failing Art Centre is one without the resources to undertake anything other than keeping the doors open.

People will leave the Community and eventually (and I've seen it happen) the Community dies, along with the art and culture that made that Community what it was.

What's the harm in a bit of fake art?

People who don't want change have commented:

'If it is illegal to sell fake products the shelves will be empty, there won't be anything for tourists to buy'

No, the shelves will now be filled with the genuine product and sellers will no longer need to apologise for selling product that is marketed on the back of the genuine Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander 'brand'. The tourists who travel to Uluru would be horrified if they thought the wood carvings sold at the Cultural Centre were created in sweat-shop conditions in Bali; as it is, I've seen them looking scornfully at the tags on T-shirts and other merchandise bearing the information 'Made in China'. Art Centres will quickly fill the gap created by the removal of fake art.

'The authentic product is too expensive' What they are really saying is *'I want a 500% (more if I can get it) mark-up'*. The fact is that the authentic product is actually ridiculously inexpensive. The carved artefacts from Central Australia can be purchased for as little as \$20. Small paintings on canvas from the Central and Western Desert can be less than \$100, baskets and weavings from the Top End, ditto. It just seems strange that a tourist, whether local or overseas, who decides to buy a piece of Indigenous art, would prefer a knock-off to the genuine article, when the prices could actually be comparable. It's lazy marketing. The proposition would have more weight if the authentic product was a Rolex watch; at least the buyer (except for the dim-witted) knows *exactly* what they are getting.

'We tell the buyer that the product isn't made by an Aboriginal artist, so we are honest about it' That's hardly a ringing endorsement of bad practice; to sell an item that is designed to look like the genuine article, and is bought *only because* it looks like the genuine article, but is actually not, is simply capitalising on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists whose work has made their art so recognisable.

So what *really* is the harm in a bit of fake art?

The harm is both economic and cultural.

It surprises me that in an age where consumers are so concerned with ethical buying, that a market for fake art even exists, and I suspect that it does because, in the main, the buyer is *not* informed that the work is not the creation of an Indigenous artist; the buyer sees a pretty dot-painted and varnished boomerang and just assumes it must have been made by an Indigenous artist without realising that the maker is (a) not an artist and (b) is indigenous to South East Asia. So, no questions asked or answered.

To that extent, if fake art did not exist, if it was illegal to sell art presenting itself as Indigenous art when it was not, then the market would be replaced by what buyers either thought they were buying, or would have preferred to buy, in the first place. The product is out there, I see it in every Community with an Art Centre, I see it at the art fairs around the country, and I see it in the shops that do sell authentic Indigenous art.

Which means, conversely, that because it does exist and it does get sold, that every such sale represents an opportunity lost to the makers and sellers of authentic Indigenous art.

We don't know how big that market is but, judging by the extent of opposition to change, it is probably quite substantial. Which means that the opportunity costs to the local Indigenous artists and Communities is equally substantial.

From a long term perspective, though, the effect of allowing works that look like Australian Indigenous art to be sold, even with a mandatory 'heads-up' as Indigenous art will be economically and culturally awful. If it's okay to sell varnished and dot-painted boomerangs, why not dot-painted canvases where the mark-up will be truly stupendous; why not knock-off carved birds, baskets and weavings, fabric and fashion wear. Why would you buy a 110 X 140 acrylic

on canvas from an Art Centre or member of the Indigenous Art Code for \$3,000 when you can get something that looks similar from a shop for \$500 for which the shop paid \$50?

Many buyers of Indigenous art are concerned that not only is the work that of an Indigenous Australian, but also that the artist has been rewarded fairly for their work; they will deal only with Art Centres or with gallerists and dealers who only sell on behalf of the artist because that is their assurance that (a) the work has provenance and (b) the artist has been properly rewarded for their work. They have fulfilled two objectives – they have enriched their own life and they have supported an Indigenous artist living and working in a remote community.

Equally (and perhaps more) importantly, they have supported the Art Centre in that Community.

If fake art is allowed to continue its unrelenting march into the living rooms of Australia, becomes accepted and the norm it will:

- diminish and devalue the cultural value of Australia's Indigenous artists;
- legitimise bad practice;
- encourage others to expand the market for such products;
- expand the range of products available, and
- force Art Centres to compete solely on price

they will be in a war they cannot win – as I was told over fifty years ago 'there's only one thing worse than the fellow who drops his price to make a sale and that's the fellow who drops his price to match it'.

And if the Arts Centres become unviable, well, I think it's pretty obvious what the outcome of that will be.