

SENATE SUBMISSION

Inquiry into the Indigenous Visual Arts and Crafts sector

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The current size and scale of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector

The Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development asserts that the Indigenous visual arts and craft sector is the second largest employer of Australian Indigenous people. The industry is growing steadily despite the lack of coordinated infrastructure and operational and program-based support from all three tiers of government.

Professor Jon Altman, in the 2005 Kenneth Myer Lecture in Arts and Entertainment Management said of the sector:

"...in 1980 it was estimated to be worth \$2.5 million (Pascoe 1981); in 1987-88, \$18.5 million (Altman 1989); and most recently somewhere around \$100 million per annum (see Altman 2003)." (Altman, 2005)

The creative capacity of Indigenous communities, artists and organisations in Australia is an immense untapped resource. When meaningfully harnessed, it has the potential to address many areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Creativity can empower communities by giving them the means to realise self-determination strategies. Current government policy paternalistically guides Indigenous creative activity, causing communities, families and individuals to miss out on the power of working with community in a sensitive, creative and partnership-based approach.

The economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector

The enormous economic value of the Indigenous arts and crafts sector is beyond doubt. But the sector is riddled with dubious and unethical business practices on the part of collectors, dealers and galleries who continue to rip off Indigenous artists and communities. The result is that the major economic benefits are all too often diverted away from the Indigenous creators. The ramifications of these exploitative practices extend beyond the financial. Indigenous art can be connected to sacred business, communal lore, family stories, and land connections, and the exploitation of the economic rights of Indigenous artists also infringes on their cultural and religious rights.

Activities in the visual arts and craft sector provide enormous social benefits to Indigenous people. The creation of visual and craft by Indigenous people is, in its essence, fundamentally social in ways that societies nurtured on the individualism and iconoclasm of artists find hard to understand. To be an Indigenous artist or artisan is quite a different calling than to be an artist in the European tradition. These social benefits manifest themselves in the communal nature and place of art in the lives of Indigenous people and in the lives of individual Indigenous artists. The function of art and craft extends beyond aesthetic pleasure – it is embedded in daily life, family connection, traditional law as well as in dreaming lore and spirituality. For many Indigenous artists, visual art and craft is not seen as a commodity but rather as something akin to a family member – it represents a multi-layered connection to the past, present and future. The social role of creating visual art and craft is also primary to the social benefit and meaning of art and craft activity in the community context.

The Indigenous visual arts and crafts sector is absolutely central to cultural sustainability for Indigenous Australia and cultural diversity in the wider Australian community. The sector is a living demonstration of the continual connection to land, family, dreaming, culture and place that dates back many millennia. Arts practice is a fundamental part of the way of life for Indigenous artists and communities.

The overall financial, cultural and artistic sustainability of the sector

The sector is currently in a very fragile state. The demise of ATSIC and the resulting dispersal of funding to a range of different state and federal government agencies exposes Indigenous art centres, community based organisations and individual Indigenous artists to political interference.

The cultural and creative entrepreneurship in the sector is yet to be fully harnessed. The sector lacks long-term operational support and targeted, intensive, regionally or place-based training and skills development is lacking. The sector also lacks a research culture to record this information as well as to monitor and to develop the intellectual capacity of the sector.

While the market for Indigenous visual art and craft has displayed impressive growth in recent years, most of the financial benefits from this boom have been siphoned off by non-Indigenous dealers, retailers and agents. The result is that the sustainability of the sector at the grass roots, creative level has been only marginally enhanced. This situation has been compounded by the lack of *droit de suite* legislation in Australia.

The current and likely future priority infrastructure needs of the sector

This issue should be the subject of a properly resourced inquiry, research and report. Such an inquiry would be highly beneficial to the sector, the education/training institutions, communities and individual Indigenous artists and artisans. This consultation should have a community cultural development approach – not a top down anthropological approach.

The Wilin Centre sees the need for further community capacity building through education and training as well as networking, management and business based opportunity links. The Centre works with individual Indigenous artists through their career development and sees the need for the following long-term program and infrastructure developments:

- Indigenous arts managers
- Indigenous arts agents
- Indigenous arts and cultural organisational development and networking
- Indigenous regional cultural development workers
- Further support and development of representative advocacy bodies
- Indigenous producers and production companies
- Indigenous entrepreneur programs and accelerator programs
- Indigenous community enterprise business incubators
- Scholarships for Indigenous artists to study and gain formal degrees

From anecdotal evidence it seems that infrastructure is available in the top end of Australia although it needs to be leveraged and renovated to achieve its full potential. To facilitate this, the development of human and operational resources in these areas should be given high priority. The reverse may be true for Indigenous artists in South Eastern Australia who lack space, organisational and advocacy infrastructure (Couzens, 2004), but have better access to education programs and skilled arts managers.

Opportunities for strategies and mechanisms that the sector could adopt to improve its practices, capacity and sustainability, including to deal with unscrupulous or unethical conduct

There needs to be sufficient leverage and support from advocacy bodies such as ANKAAA, NAVA, Desart, UMI Arts to continue the awareness raising, educating and training of Indigenous artists and arts centres to develop place-based approaches to dealing with unethical conduct. There would be considerable benefits from the development of a national approach and protocol only if it was supported by the appropriate implementation at the local level. Galleries, dealers and buyers should be required to sign a code of conduct agreement and advertise these to clients.

Opportunities for existing government support programs for Indigenous visual arts and crafts to be more effectively targeted to improve the sector's capacity and future sustainability

This issue should be explored by a larger and more specific inquiry. Such an inquiry should be national and make reference to the diversity of language, geography, culture and arts practice of the Indigenous visual arts and crafts industry.

Future opportunities for further growth of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector, including through further developing international markets

There is need to highlight all regions of Australia as exciting in terms of touring and the promotion of Indigenous arts and crafts – not just top-end art. The Wilin Centre suggests that all regions from each state and territory of Australia be developed in terms of arts with access to good advice for business and touring potential.

References

Altman, J. 2005, "Brokering Aboriginal art: A critical perspective on marketing, institutions, and the state", Deakin University Centre for Leisure Management Research, Bowater School of Management and Marketing, Kenneth Myer Lecture in Arts and Entertainment Management

Couzens, V. 2004 Introduction: Indigenous art in Victoria, *Deadly Expressions*, Arts Victoria and the Koori Business Network