

Carvings From Creation Time



Courtesy of Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory

THE TIWI PEOPLE of Melville Island off the north coast of Australia tell a dramatic story about a spirit ancestor named Purrukuparli: Long ago, in the Dreaming, the great creation time, Purrukuparli lived on a beautiful island with his wife Bima and their infant son. Every day Bima went out to gather food and took the baby with her. But one morning she met a man called Japarra, who persuaded her to leave the child asleep under a bush and sneak off into the forest with him.

It was a very hot day, and Bima returned to discover that the shade had

moved and that her son had died in the hot sun. When Purrukuparli found out, he was enraged. He struck Bima and drove her into the forest. Then, picking up the body of his son, he walked slowly into the sea, calling out: "You must all follow me; as I die, so must you all die." And so death came into the world.

When Japarra saw what was happening, he changed himself into the moon. Bima became a curlew, a wailing bird who wanders in the night crying in remorse for her lost son.

This epic tale of betrayal and retribution is depicted in a small but dramatic

wooden statue that stands in the Northern Territory Museum in Darwin. Painted in vivid yellow, red, black, and white, the piece shows the weeping Purrukuparli carrying his dead child in his arms and walking into the sea. It is but one example of the dazzling Tiwi arts and crafts that for the past eight years have been coming out of Melville and its twin island of Bathurst.

Lying just 40 miles north of Darwin, these large tropical islands, covered with mangroves and eucalypti and laced by broad, slow-flowing rivers, are home not only to Tiwis but also to a spectacular

array of wildlife, including an alarming number of man-eating crocodiles.

Tiwi legend tells of the creation of the islands by an old blind woman, whose three children became the ancestors of the modern tribesmen. In fact, nobody knows how long the Tiwis have been there, but they probably are descendants of mainland aborigines and the fiercely independent seafaring Macassans of Indonesia.

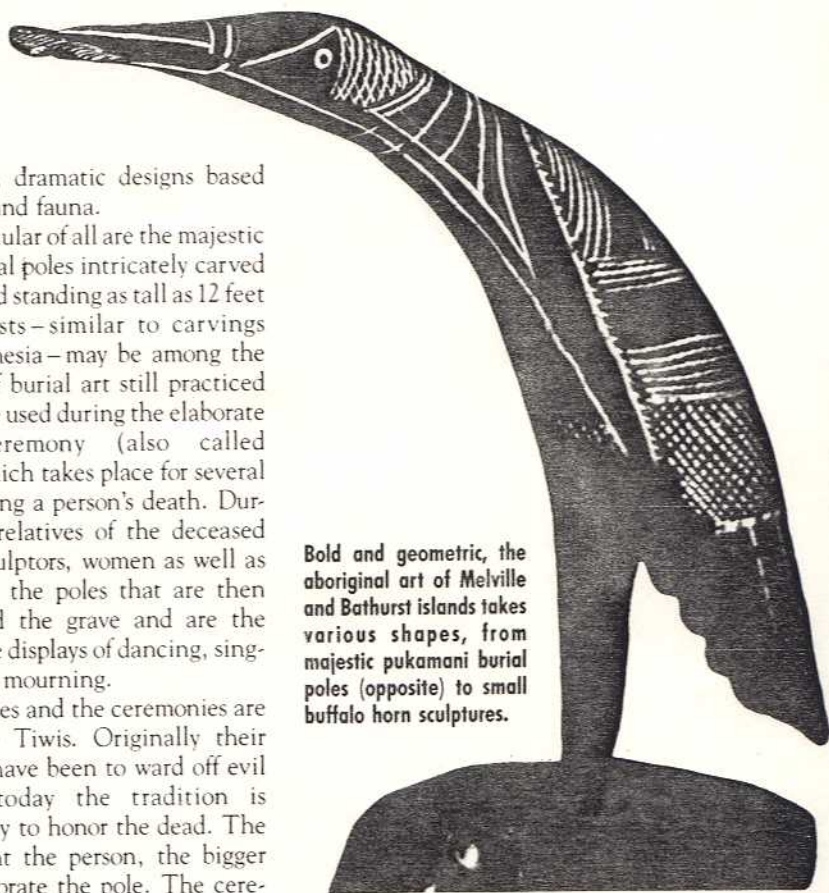
Europeans didn't arrive until 1824, when the British set up a small settlement, only to be driven out by disease and hostile Tiwis a few years later. The islands then remained undisturbed until missionaries came in 1911. Perhaps that long period of isolation accounts for the fact that Tiwis have retained so much of their culture and tradition.

Today they are attracting worldwide attention for their vivid sculptures, which range from small, exquisite carvings of birds and animals made out of buffalo horn, to much larger wooden statues of spirit ancestors and other mythical beings. Also famous is Tiwi cloth: brightly colored, screen-printed fabric produced in island workshops and

featuring bold, dramatic designs based on local flora and fauna.

Most spectacular of all are the majestic *pukamani*, burial poles intricately carved and painted and standing as tall as 12 feet high. The posts—similar to carvings found in Indonesia—may be among the oldest forms of burial art still practiced today. They are used during the elaborate mourning ceremony (also called *pukamani*), which takes place for several months following a person's death. During this time relatives of the deceased commission sculptors, women as well as men, to carve the poles that are then erected around the grave and are the focus of intense displays of dancing, singing, and ritual mourning.

Both the poles and the ceremonies are unique to the Tiwis. Originally their function may have been to ward off evil spirits, but today the tradition is observed simply to honor the dead. The more important the person, the bigger and more elaborate the pole. The cere-



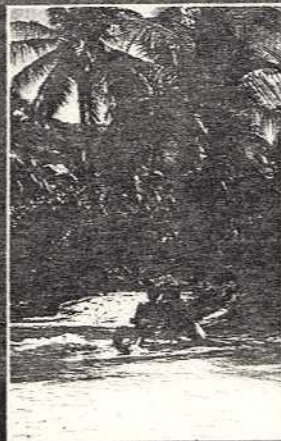
Bold and geometric, the aboriginal art of Melville and Bathurst islands takes various shapes, from majestic *pukamani* burial poles (opposite) to small buffalo horn sculptures.



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ARTS

monies are believed to be thousands of years old, and all over the island you can see remnants of ancient graveyards, with bleached and decaying poles tilting like lonely giants at the surrounding jungle.

Carving the poles is a time-consuming task, and an artist of distinction, such as tribal elder Paddy Henry, may take as long as a month to create a single one, hewing its basic shape out of a solid tree trunk, then carving it and painting intricate geometric designs using natural paints. The reds and yellows come from local clays that are heated to produce



Courtesy of Car Gallery

Tiwi designs on fabric use traditional pukamani imagery, such as birds and abstract symbols. Newer poles may showcase sports and technology.

darker tints. Charcoal is used for black.

Paddy is a wiry, wizened patriarch of indeterminate years. Every day—when he's not fishing, that is—he leaves his government-issue, cyclone-proof hut, picks up his chisel and ax, and sets to work on his latest creation. The pole he produces could mark an island grave, or it could wind up in New York. These days he never knows.

It's one of the ironies of Paddy Henry's long life that Tiwi culture, once suppressed by missionaries and ignored by the rest of world, is now the subject of an art buyers' boom. Collectors are pouring in from around the world, buying up poles and statues wherever they can find them. (However, poles that have marked graves, or have been used in ceremonies, can no longer be taken from the country.) Where once the artist would be lucky to collect a few dollars for a pole,

today he's amazed to see them fetch \$2,000 or more.

Paddy says he learned the art from his father, and sometimes he looks back nostalgically to a golden era when men were men and poles were really something. In the good old days, says Paddy, a decent pukamani measured seven or eight feet around, and weighed a respectable ton or two.

"Big ceremonies then," he says wistfully, "lots of dancing, good dancing. Lots of beer." He laughs mischievously.

Nowadays, poles tend to be smaller and often reflect modern preoccupations, with carvings of footballs, cars, and even four-wheel-drive trucks. In addition to being used in burial ceremonies, many are produced for tourists. You can find the poles, along with a range of smaller sculptures, brightly decorated spears, bark baskets, and the famous Tiwi cloth, at the small co-operative stores on Melville and Bathurst.

The islands are aboriginal reserves, and visitors are not allowed in without permits. That's the only way the Tiwis have of protecting their low-key life-style and their fertile fishing grounds. For pro-

spective art buyers and other visitors, the easiest way to get there is simply to take one of the daily tours from Darwin, for which permits are not required.

Nor do you have to be a wealthy collector to buy a piece of Tiwi sculpture. Prices range from \$80 to \$300 for small

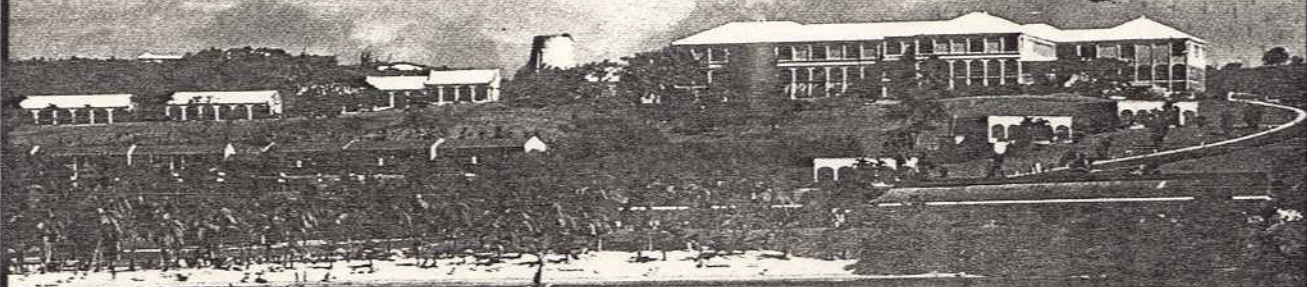
carvings and from \$800 to \$2,000 for a pole. The investment can be worth it. In the United States, a large, well-carved pole might sell for as much as ten times that amount.

It's not hard to be attracted to Tiwi sculpture. The vivid colors and the sense



Working with an ax head and natural paints, Paddy Henry produces art that may decorate a tribal grave or a gallery. In recent years Tiwi carvings have found an international audience.

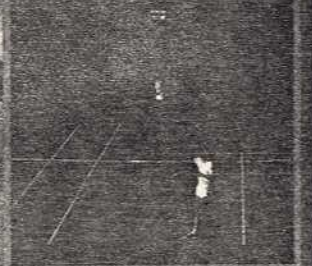
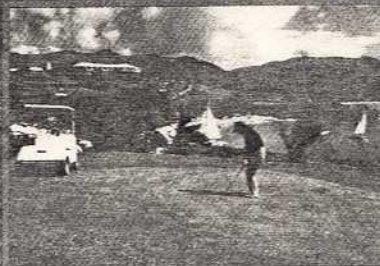
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of design are superb, and these are reflected in every level of artwork—from tiny bird carvings to ornate statues of spirit ancestors to the magnificent pukamani poles.

In a dusty room behind an island workshop, I found and fell in love with a statue of an elegant black goddess. Her finely carved face and tiny folded hands expressed both serenity and a sense of tragedy. Was this Bima, the grieving mother? I asked. No one knew, and the artist who had fashioned her was long dead, killed when his vehicle overturned on a treacherous island road.

The simple, elegant design and the power of her presence were overwhelming. I would have paid anything, but she wasn't for sale. She was being kept for an island museum, the crafts advisor said. Perhaps it was just as well. By the end of my visit I realized that the statue belonged in her island home after all—a powerful statement of Tiwi creativity and an inspiration to younger artists to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors.

—VIRGINIA WESTBURY

In Search of Tiwi Art

Tiwi Tours in Darwin offers a range of half-day to three-day tours of both Melville and Bathurst, including visits to artists' workshops. Generally prices for artworks are 30 to 50 percent lower on the islands than on the mainland. Bookings and inquiries can be made through travel agents or offices of the Northern Territory Tourist Commission.

The Northern Territory Museum in Darwin also has one of the best collections of pukamani poles, statues, and bark paintings in Australia. The museum is open seven days a week.

In Los Angeles, Caz Gallery, at 8715 Melrose Avenue, represents aboriginal artists, the first of its kind in the U.S.

Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia, recently published by Braziller, covers both historical and contemporary work. Lavishly produced, it reveals the vitality and continuity of the aboriginal artistic tradition.