

# Carvings From Creation Time



Courtesy of Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory

**T**HE 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.

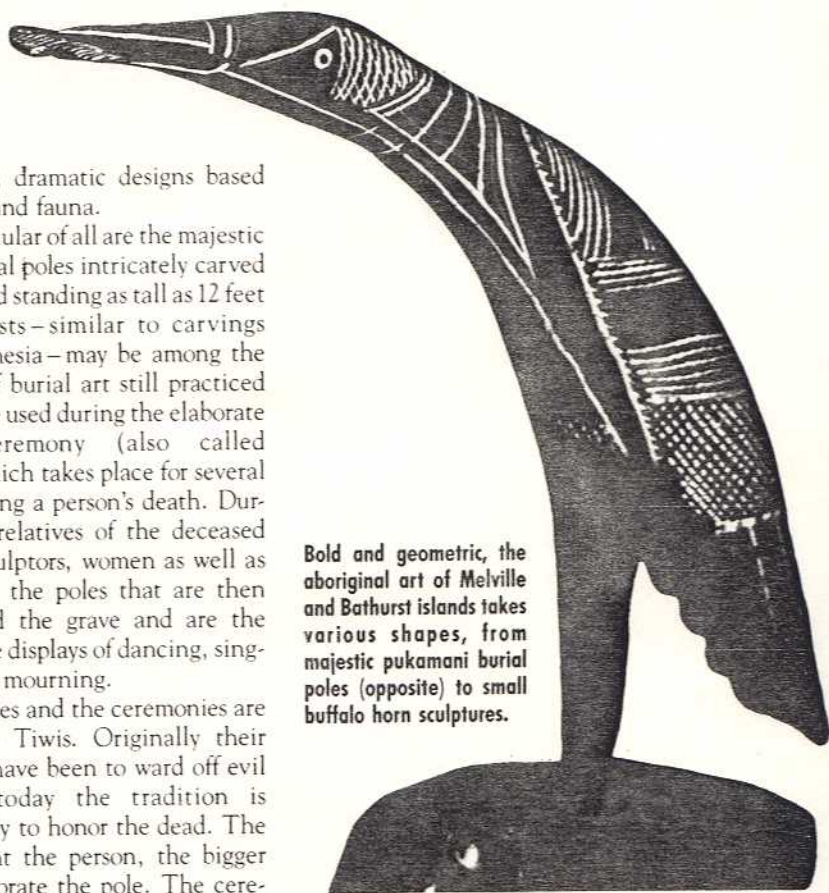
Europeans didn't arrive until 1824, when the British set up a small settlement, only to be driven out by disease and hostile Tiwis a few years later. The islands then remained undisturbed until missionaries came in 1911. Perhaps that long period of isolation accounts for the fact that Tiwis have retained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

