

Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge

Howard Morphy



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Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge Howard Morphy Ancestral Connections unlocks the inner meaning of Australian Aboriginal bark painting. Drawing on more than ten years of fieldwork among the Yolngu—an Aboriginal people of Northeast Arnhem Land—and applying both anthropological and art historical methods, Howard Morphy explores systematically the graphic representation of traditional knowledge in Yolngu art. He also charts the role that art has played in Aboriginal society both present and past.

The rich symbolism of Yolngu art links the Yolngu directly with the "Dreaming," the time of world-creation that continues as the spiritual dimension of the present. Morphy shows how a complex dialectic of "inside" and "outside" interpretations of painting structures the system of knowledge in Yolngu society, and how European interest in this art has caused certain changes in the conditions of its production. The "inside" significance of the art, however, has not changed; it retains its dual ability to represent and to constitute relationships between things.

Ancestral Connections is a major contribution to the anthropology of art. A subtle commentary on the colonial encounter in northern Australia, the book demonstrates how the Yolngu have used their art—against all odds—as an instrument of cultural survival and as a component of the economic and political transformation of their society.

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