

Australian Art in Paris: Gallery Arts d’Australie•Stéphane Jacob

Elaine Lewis



Stéphane Jacob is director and owner of the gallery Arts d’Australie•Stéphane Jacob in Paris; he is a graduate of the École du Louvre, a member of the Chambre nationale des experts spécialisés en objets d’art et de collection (CNES) and is co-author of a number of books on Australian Aboriginal painting as well as a catalogue of the Aboriginal Art collections belonging to the Musée des Confluences, Lyon.

During the first Paris lockdown, Stéphane published the story of his travels in Australia on LinkedIn. Journalist Valérie Sasportas read his story and published an article about it in *Le Figaro* newspaper on March 24, 2020.

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With *Le Figaro*'s permission, *The French Australian Review* incorporates part of the article into the following interview.¹

Co-editor of *The French Australian Review*, Elaine Lewis, who first met Stéphane when she was the owner of the Australian Bookshop in Paris, recently spoke with Stéphane about the article and his passion for promoting Australian art in France and other parts of Europe.

Stéphane, can you tell us about your first visit to Australia in 1991? Why did you decide to visit Australia and what were your first impressions?

In 1988, after completing high school, I was fortunate to spend one year in Florence (Italy) where I fell in love with an Australian musician. Back in Paris, we decided to visit his parents for Christmas. We left Paris on a grey and cold morning to land twenty-four hours later in warm and sunny Sydney. I'll always remember my first breakfast on a friend's terrace in Sydney—new tastes are amongst my first memories—avocado on toast under a mango tree; the taste of coconut cakes, called 'lamingtons', a national favourite; and, not to be forgotten, the fabulous bitter sensation of a Vegemite spread! We then left Sydney for Sawtell (on the north-eastern coast of NSW) where I experienced RSL² ambience as well as bowling green magic.

Before your first visit to Australia you worked with art historian, Guy Cogeval.³ How did this influence your decision to return to Australia in 1995?

While I was studying art history at the École du Louvre, I founded, with some friends, the Student's Association, and I organised our first big annual party in a magical place, the Musée des monuments français at the Trocadéro in Paris (the museum is now named the Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine). This was made possible by one of our teachers, Guy Cogeval, who had recently become director of that institution. We got on well and he asked me to become the PR and Communications Manager for the Art Gallery.

¹ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/voyages/confine-un-galeriste-d-art-aborigene-raconte-ses-voyages-en-australie-sur-linked-in-20200324>.

² Licensed clubs were formed as commercial activities to initially provide services by sub-branches to members of the Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL). They are now open to the general public.

³ Guy Cogeval was appointed to the Presidency of the Musée d'Orsay in 2008 (*Journal Officiel*).

In 1995, after a difficult sentimental breakup and budget cuts at the museum which didn't really allow me to progress in my job, I felt I needed a break. Australia came to mind. It was the call of 'the other'. I left Paris in 1995 on a working holiday visa, believing I would easily find a job in a cultural institution in Australia, but that proved to be more difficult than expected. Instead my visit to Australia became a journey of discovery which was to change my life.



Here's a photo taken on my second visit to Australia in 1995 during a trip to Rottnest Island, on the western coast of Australia. I can be seen talking to my parents through a huge Nokia mobile phone, telling them about my fascination for this country, its people and, above all, about my burgeoning passion for Aboriginal art. (I am most grateful to my parents for immediately trusting me and my plans and for being supportive of my incredible journey up to this day.)

Where did you see your first Indigenous art? Do you remember your first reactions to it?

My very first encounter with Indigenous art was through music and the didgeridu and then through the visual arts. Early during my stay in Sydney, I was introduced to art dealer Michael Carr who became a friend. His mother, the fabulous artist Pat Harris, lived in Canberra at the time. He asked me to join him for a weekend visit to his mother to discover Canberra.

What a weekend! A few hours after arriving in Canberra we visited the Chapman Gallery run by the very energetic Judith Behan. We arrived there at a bad moment! Judith was very angry with a client who had commissioned an

important painting by iconic artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye—the painting had to be blue. But when the painting arrived it was too blue for the client! I saw the work and fell in love with it immediately. Michael suggested we buy it together and he would then put it on display in his Paddington gallery in Sydney. A late-night call to my parents, a little bit of explaining and the power of conviction, and there we were with a splendid work that was sold only weeks later to an important Singaporean collector.



Blue Bush Leaf-trellis, Abie Loy Kemarre, Utopia, Northern Territory, represented by the gallery Arts d’Australie•Stéphane Jacob, photograph by S. Jacob

Another work caught my eye—a work by the extraordinary Indigenous artist Lynda Syddick Napaltjarri titled *He is risen*. The representation of Christ at Golgotha was just astonishing. A few months later, after my return to Paris, this work was one of the first of a long series to enter into the French public collections. It is now held in the collections of the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac.

Those few days in Canberra were busy. My best friend's stepfather was then French Ambassador to Australia and kindly introduced me to Betty Churcher, who was the charismatic director of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. I was still hoping to find a job in a museum, but instead, she encouraged me to look at art by meeting influential collectors and benefactors in Sydney and Melbourne. She introduced me to Edmund Capon, director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Michael Darling in Sydney....

Back in Sydney, through the Darlings, I was invited by Marie-Hélène Gilly-Claudiel to one of her famous 'welcome to French-Australians' parties. There I met Isabelle de Beaumont, who was to become my future business partner for over a decade. Isabelle had been living in Australia for a few years, had a fascinating personal history and a strong interest in Indigenous culture. We got on very well and decided to go on a field trip across the Central Desert region and Arnhem Land.

During that same period, Michael Carr introduced me to philanthropist Rupert Myer and to the Melbourne art scene. I met director Bill Nuttall of the Niagara Galleries and fell in love with John Kelly's work. I bought a work and then over the next few years represented him and succeeded in organising an eight metres high, bronze sculpture of 'Cow up a Tree' to be created in Paris and presented on the Champs-Élysées before it headed to Melbourne Docklands where it still is today.

What were your impressions of the outback when you travelled there with Isabelle de Beaumont ?

My impressions? Outback Australia? In a few short words: vastness, freedom, landscape, Aboriginal, light, space, art, painting, women, colour, paradox, extreme.... I had the feeling of being drawn into a huge country fourteen times the size of France without ever having the sensation of being lost. There is this permanent contact with the earth, the elements. You never have the feeling of being alone. It is a country that lends itself to meetings.

We were fortunate in having sufficient time to enjoy every bit of that road trip. You just never get enough of an experience like that. Incredibly diverse—from dirt roads and spinifex, rocky roads and escarpments, magical waterfalls and ponds in the north, beautiful Kakadu National Park...flora, fauna—kangaroos that you constantly hope to see, magical animals. As I

am trying to answer your question I realise how difficult it is to capture the emotions that being in outback Australia evokes. Images are so numerous, ranging from dry creeks to magnificent rocks glowing at sunset, the diversity of colours, of smells...that incredible feeling of freedom where vastness and intimacy seem to be combined into one sensation of wellbeing.

Years later, we were to do another trip—with former Australian Ambassador to France and good friend John Spender—from Perth, where Isabelle lived at the next stage of her life, all the way to Margaret River, down to Albany and Esperance, across to Kalgoorlie, to Uluru and then back up to Darwin. Here, again the same magic!

For me Australia's bush and outback have a strange aura of the known to which you relate immediately in the most intimate way. Every part of it is familiar and new. Not everyone relates to its vastness in the same way. I remember my late father sometimes felt uncomfortable, as if he was lost in this immensity with no sign of human presence. For me, au contraire, I have never felt so happy and liberated than in the outback.

Did you begin straight away to look for more paintings to buy?

Yes...I think the Canberra experience and then Melbourne, really confirmed my desire to represent Australian artists once I returned to Paris. I decided on a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art. I was fortunate to meet beautiful people such as gorgeous Rosalie Gascoigne, G.W.Bot [*sic*] (Christine Grishin), Ann Thomson, Wilma Tabacco, Euan Macleod, Matthew Johnson and Dean Bowen, who all became part of my team of artists. Going to the outback to search for Indigenous works became an absolute necessity and that is what Isabelle and I did, either by car or by joining Helen Read on one of her fabulous and renowned Didgeri Air Tours which allowed us to visit remote communities too difficult to reach by road.

We were very lucky to receive the help of many art centres across the country, allowing us to develop, over the years, a fascinating and diverse collection of works to present to European art collectors.

How did you go about setting up your Paris gallery?

When I eventually got back to Paris in the early summer of 1996, the economic situation in France was not good and lots of friends were doubtful that this would be the right time to open a gallery—especially an 'exotic'

gallery specialising in Australian art! I also realised that the nature of the work I had brought back in my 'suitcase', and its specificities, would need some kind of explanation to a new audience.

My parents were living in a very nice apartment in the 17th, near the Arc de Triomphe. My mother, who had long been my father's assistant, was not working at the time and we decided that she would help me and that I would use part of the apartment in which to start my business. So, for many years the apartment where I grew up became Arts d'Australie•Stéphane Jacob's international headquarters, leaving very limited space or privacy for my parents! After their recent deaths in May 2021, my brothers and I decided to sell the apartment and December 2021 will be the end of twenty-five years of happy cohabitation and memories at 179 boulevard Pereire ... and the beginning of a new era!

How did you go about promoting and selling the paintings back in 1996?

On October 1, 1996, Arts d'Australie•Stéphane Jacob was officially created and we started doing small evening gatherings of ten to twelve people, once or twice a week. People would be seated in the living room with a glass of Australian syrah and some nibbles and we would spend the evening together. I would do a forty-five minute presentation of Australian history, geography, art and Indigenous culture showing, one after the other, a selection of paintings. This was followed by questions and answers. These gatherings usually started around 7.30 p.m. and rarely ended before midnight! Even now people remember these warm and enlightening evenings.

Yes, I remember an evening you presented in the Australian Bookshop in 1996. The audience was fascinated by your talk and by the paintings. And that night I saw my first Emily Kngwarreye!

Stéphane, tell us about some of your early successes.

As early as September 1996, even before the gallery was created, French newspaper *Libération* asked for a painting by John Kelly—*Two Men Lifting a Cow*—to be reproduced on their front page. And, very soon after my return to France, the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie acquired seven works from me. In April 1998, the prestigious *Revue du Louvre* had one of the works by artist Helicopter Tjungurrayi on its front cover.

Then, late in 1998, the Mairie de Paris asked me if I could suggest an Australian artist for their huge outdoor exhibition to be held the following year on the Champs-Élysées. That's how I got the project of the Foundry de Coubertin to cast that fantastic, metres high eucalypt tree holding a rectangular cow legs up, *Cow up a Tree*.

Do you know the story behind *Cow up a Tree*?

This amazing sculpture relates to Australia's history. John Kelly studied at the Slade School of Art after completing his Master of Arts in painting. Many of his works—including the famous *Cow up a Tree* now in Docklands, Melbourne—reference the appointment of William Dobell as an official war artist, commissioned to make papier-mâché cows during the Second World War!

The cow's distinctive shape with its small head and long neck is influenced by the portrait of Joshua Smith, the Australian artist who was painted by William Dobell in 1943.⁴ The Joshua Smith painting and the papier-mâché cows were deeply etched in the memory of many Australians. During World War II, the Australian Government believed they were to be invaded by the Japanese so ordered artists to camouflage army tanks and airfields. William Dobell had the idea of making papier mâché cows and placing them like decoys on the airfields. (The cows were meant to distract Japanese pilots surveying rural areas for military defence bases. Dobell was quoted as saying that he thought the authorities had underestimated the eyesight of Japanese airmen.)



La vache dans un arbre (Cow up a Tree), Docklands, Melbourne, by John Kelly, onlymelbourne.com.au

⁴ Dobell's painting of Joshua Smith won the 1943 Archibald Prize.

The other explanation for this sculpture relates to recent meteorological events that have shocked the world. Sudden floods and torrential rains fall regularly in Australia and, once they have gone, sometimes leave drowned sheep and cows perched in the tops of the trees.

You have a wonderful collection of Australian Indigenous art as well as contemporary Australian ‘Western’ art. What drew you to Australian Aboriginal art and what does it mean to you?

For me, Aboriginal art is the art of a journey that carries us along with its energy—it leads us in a way that is hypnotic and, at the same time, calming. Painting is one of the many rich and diverse aspects of Australian Indigenous culture. It relates to the extraordinary story of the Creation of the world and the complex but essential interactions between human beings, fauna, flora and geographic diversity.

The ‘creation of the world’, as we often call it in the Western world, or the concept of the ‘Dreaming’ is the basis of all Indigenous beliefs, legends, customs, languages, rules and interactions. When a person is born, he inherits a number of elements of knowledge that he will, in his turn, transmit to others throughout his life. The interaction and respect between human beings and nature are, essentially, the roots of this system of beliefs.

When an artist paints, the canvas is placed on the floor, the artist sitting legs crossed only a few centimetres from the surface to be painted, and no preliminary design nor preparatory sketches are made. Most of the time, with a simple wooden stick or sometimes with a brush, the artist will organise a complex system of dots and symbols as would do a writer, with his alphabet and punctuation, to write a story. Painting is definitely a form of storytelling.

Aboriginal paintings with geometric, pointillist motifs in bright colours can be viewed in any way—flat, on the ground, hanging on a wall, on the ceiling. What matters is not the position of the work, nor in which material it is made, but the story itself, and the story has to be strong to depict the artist’s Country. By using the word Country, you actually name the globality of the system; the physical word ‘Country’ includes the system of belief, languages, rules—all the elements that are the legacy of the Dreaming. Each story created by an ancestor is called a ‘Dreaming’ or, in one of the languages of the Central Desert, ‘Jukurrpa’.

Do you collect bark paintings or Indigenous art works other than paintings?

Yes, absolutely. I have a great passion for barks, sculptures and prints. I always liked the delicate aspect of the bark paintings created in the northern parts of Australia. The texture of the fibre of the bark and the uneven aspect of the surface makes it a very fascinating support. The design on bark, made of ochre, has an energy of its own that is very different from paint on canvas.



Willy Kaika, Aboriginal artist from the Amata Community, South Australia, painting *Country Dreaming*, photograph by Stéphane Jacob

Sculptures are magical. For example, the fabulous Pukumani poles created by the Tiwi people on the two islands north of Darwin are made from iron wood, often of great height—up to three metres. Those carved trunks with decorations, often abstract, sometimes figurative and painted with ochres, are pure jewels. So are the memorial poles or Larrakitj, created by the Yolngu people in the Yirrkala/Gove region. Beautiful memorial poles with amazing painted designs.

In the region of Maningrida, you will find the delicate and fascinating figures of ancestral beings—Yawkyawk water spirits, Mimi and Warraburnburn spirits. And, on Cape York Peninsula at Aurukun, the wooden animals such as camp dogs or sea figures are also unique.

Materials can be very diverse—one of the most fascinating movements resides in the environmentally engaged production of sculptures made of fishing net found on the shores of many communities living near the shores, especially around the Gulf of Carpentaria. The *Ghostnet* art movement has developed over the past ten years in a fascinating way. The artists are raising global awareness of this very destructive form of pollution that deprives Indigenous communities of their food resources and damages important cultural symbols. This is because some of the fish or sea creatures caught in these waste nets often play an important role in local mythology.

In 2016, I was extremely fortunate to curate a huge exhibition at the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco where a large display of *Ghostnet* sculptures was presented, opening the way to further exhibitions at the United Nations in NYC, in Virginia, in San Francisco, at the Ethnography Museum in Geneva, in Bremen, Germany and in Le Havre (2021).⁵

I have also had the good fortune to represent some of the leading Indigenous printmakers from the Torres Strait such as Dennis Nona and Alick Tipoti. One linocut print by Alick was enlarged to a 663 square metre flood-lit design on the roof of the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco,⁶ for the 2016 exhibition (mentioned above), giving Alick the opportunity to create a dialogue about sea preservation with H.S.H. Prince Albert II of Monaco. This led to a private visit of the Prince to the Island of Badu and the production of a 93-minute film, *Alick and Albert*, which was presented at the Festival des Antipodes⁷ in St Tropez on October 13, 2021.⁸

⁵ <http://www.artsdaustraliae.com/pdf/NY-Press-Kit-light.pdf>.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4o-kV-Q7lz8>.

⁶ See article by Deirdre Gilfedder, p. 54–69.

⁸ H.S.H. Prince Albert II was present at the 23rd Festival des Antipodes in Saint-Tropez for the screening of the documentary *Alick and Albert*, <https://www.monaco-tribune.com/en/2021/10/photos-first-images-of-prince-albert-in-the-documentary-alick-and-albert/>.



Installation of works at the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco in 2016,
photograph by Stéphane Jacob

On your website www.artsdaustralie.fr you have a list of Australian books to tempt your viewers to further reading. What kinds of books have you chosen?

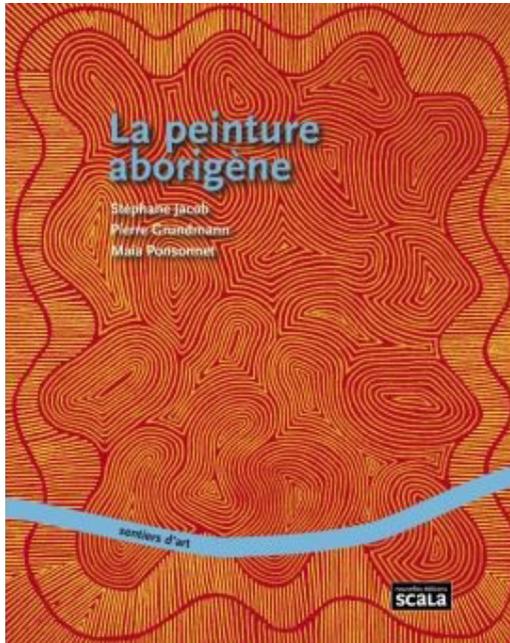
There are some ‘classics’ such as *Songlines (Le chant des pistes)* by Bruce Chatwin and the Arthur Upfield ‘*Bony*’ books that tell stories set in outback Australia (the adventures of detective Napoléon Bonaparte, translated into French by Michèle Valencia), but I also recommend children’s books about Aboriginal people and their lands, some academic books and reference books—in particular art books and catalogues.⁹

What is the name of the book you published with Nouvelles Éditions Scala?

The book is titled *La peinture aborigène*; I co-wrote it with journalist Pierre Grundmann and linguist Maïa Ponsonnet. It describes the development of contemporary Australian Aboriginal art from the seventies onwards.

⁹ <https://www.artsdaustralie.com/fr/bibliographie.php>.

I have also written a number of articles and texts for catalogues and magazines and have established my own publishing house, Éditions Arts d’Australie•Stéphane Jacob, Paris. I regularly publish bilingual (French-English) monographs/catalogues about Australian Indigenous artists (for example, *Ningura Nappurula*, *Abie Loy Kemarre*) or themed books such as *Ghostnet Art*, *Art of the Torres Strait Islanders*....



Have you been involved in presenting Australian Indigenous art at Quai Branly?

The Quai Branly has an excellent staff and very large collections that go back decades. I was very fortunate that seven of the works that I sold to the former Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie are now in the Quai Branly collection.¹⁰

¹⁰ Philippe Peltier, “‘Under Western Eyes’: a short analysis of the reception of Aboriginal art in France through the press”, *Les actes de colloques du musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac* 4 (2014), <http://journals.openedition.org/actesbranly/581>, DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/actesbranly.581> .

***The French Australian Review* recently published a Book Note (issue 70) about the discovery of a full-body plaster cast of an Aboriginal man, Bonangera (Bonni/Bonny, of the Badgela people) in the basement of the Musée des Confluences in Lyon. Can you tell us about their collection of Indigenous Australian art and your contribution to it?**

In Lyon my involvement was quite intense with the Musée des Confluences. In the early days of 2000, the then new director of the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle de Lyon contacted me to assist his team with the redevelopment of their permanent collection. A new architectural project was to be created in the southern parts of the city where the two local rivers, the Rhône and the Saône, meet. At this emblematic location the Musée des Confluences was to be erected. Unique in its genre, the permanent collection was to be organised around four themes that could be summarised as: the world of origins (where we come from); the diversity of species; societies (what we do, where we live, how we interact); and death (how different cultures deal with the after life). The director, Michel Côté, came from Quebec and had a strong interest in Indigenous culture. He already had introduced artworks from Inuit artists and was interested in developing an Australian Indigenous art collection as he felt that both cultures had ancestral and contemporary approaches that would perfectly match each of the main themes of the permanent collection.

Over the past twenty years, nearly eighty works recommended by me have found their way to this iconic French museum. The quality of the exchanges with the staff over that period of time is certainly one of my most pleasant and meaningful professional achievements!¹¹

Paris

¹¹ In 2018 Stéphane Jacob-Langevin received an AO (Order of Australia) for services rendered to Australian art and culture. In 2019, He was made Knight of the Order of Cultural Merit of Monaco by H.S.H. Prince Albert II of Monaco.