

ENRICHING THE WORLD

WORDS
JANE RAFFAN
PHOTOGRAPHY
VARIOUS



Margaret Levi

Today, the Levi and Kaplan collection is one of the foremost private collections of Aboriginal art in the United States and Australia...

Holding concurrent positions as Chair in US Politics and Director of Research and Research Training at the US Studies Centre, Sydney University, and Bacharach Professor of International Studies at the University of Washington, Margaret Levi's high-profile political science pedigree spans both sides of the Pacific. Less well publicised is her passion for Aboriginal art.

Levi's connection to Australia is longstanding, dating back to 1984 when she ventured here to work on a social justice project through the ANU. During this time she met anthropologist Diane Bell, and not long afterwards she acquired her first Aboriginal painting. Levi and husband Robert Kaplan have collected Aboriginal art ever since, crisscrossing the Pacific, and Australia, in search of prize pieces. Pondering their journey together and the people they've befriended along the way, Levi remarks, "Our world has been unbelievably enriched".

Today, the Levi and Kaplan Collection is one of the foremost private collections of Aboriginal art in the United States and Australia, with more than 100 highlights to be showcased in a dedicated exhibition titled *Ancestral Modern* at the Seattle Art Museum in 2012. In 2007, the Museum established a permanent gallery dedicated to Australian Aboriginal Art (the first major US gallery to do so) with donations from the Levi and Kaplan Collection, of which the couple is enormously proud, especially as the context is contemporary and the institution's commitment is serious.

Meanwhile, for Levi, signalling the US Studies Centre's representative diversity, and thereby the diversity of US studies (which span politics and policy, economics and business, culture and society) is crucial. In essence, diversity represents the philosophical underpinning of the Centre's mission and vision, with Levi stressing, "Our broad focus brings a range of Americans here whom Australians might find interesting, and in the process teaches Americans about Australia". To this end, Levi's interests and connections in the world of Aboriginal art have played a significant role in the Centre's teaching program and related events.

In the first year of her appointment, the Centre developed a seminar in association with Professor Roger Benjamin of the University's Power Institute of Fine Arts (also home to a fine Indigenous collection) around the repatriation from the Seattle Art Museum collection of an Aboriginal sacred stone, known as a *tjuringa*. While curator, Pam McClusky, generated the motivation for the return, Levi capitalised on the momentum, earning positive PR for the Centre's promotion of cultural issues common to Americans and Australians.

Opportunism, according to Levi, is key to the dynamism within the Centre's program. "We are very opportunistic. As long as ideas are good enough to initiate a process, and can be justified as having an important US dimension, as well as popular interest, we'll pursue a range of programs."

In 2010 the Centre supported the 17th Biennale of Sydney opening symposium. ▶

CROSS CULTURES

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In 2011 the Centre sponsored Alan Michelson, a Native American artist, to speak at the Adelaide Film Festival and in Sydney in conjunction with the exhibition *Stop (the) Gap/Mind (the) Gap*, organised by former National Gallery of Australia Senior Curator of Aboriginal Art, Brenda Croft. Levi envisions a place in the US Studies Centre program to continue to engage with ideas beyond social science or American foreign and trade policy that draws on the perspectives and experiences of Native American peoples in the US.

As Director of Research and Training at the US Studies Centre, Levi is also keen to import American talent and research methodology, particularly in the areas of quantitative methods and qualitative approaches using formal analytic theory, which she sees as lacking in Australian PhD training.

Professor Faye Ginsburg, David B Kriser Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Centre for Media, Culture and History, New York University, is among the Centre's 21-strong international academic advisory committee. Levi manages the Social Science Methods and Approaches to Research Training (SSMART) program at the US Studies Centre. In June 2011 Ginsburg led a qualitative analysis workshop for SSMART on Cultural Studies, with a focus on vulnerable populations, including members of Indigenous communities.

Levi's research focuses on how best to create organisations and states that serve their populations well, in turn receiving popular compliance with taxes and

regulations. She cut her teeth and made her career writing *Of Rule and Revenue*, which explains the conditions under which states fulfil a fiscal contract with their citizens. The book includes a case study on the Australian tax system, which Levi notes, "empowers the federal government in ways that would not occur in the US". When pressed for her views on the Howard Government's Northern Territory Intervention of 2007, Levi acknowledges that the effort to reform longstanding failures – Aboriginal disempowerment, poverty, disease and housing – is praiseworthy, but the way Howard went about solving it "was unfortunate – all elbows and knees – and no attention was given to the research or the complexity of the situation".

Social justice issues are an important motivating factor for Levi in her collecting efforts. The place of art within Australia's Aboriginal communities' cultural revival and economic survival has been well documented, and social justice has recently become an important element of government arts policy; indigenous art in particular. Levi and Kaplan are not alone among American collectors in being aware of the poverty of many Aboriginal artists and their families, and they make a point of buying through art centres or dealers with reputations for paying their artists well.

The hierarchies and complexities apparent in the Australian market around provenance and the issue of ethical buying are not broadly known outside the country. As collectors ranked among America's

1. Seattle Gallery
2. Robert Kaplan, Dorothy Napanangka and Margaret Levi



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top 100 by *Art and Antiques* magazine two years running, Levi and Kaplan feel they have a responsibility to make socio-political issues a part of their dialogues with other collectors. Kaplan comments: "When we give talks we usually raise these issues, and to people who are coming over here. We've always felt an obligation to let the American public see high-quality Aboriginal art, as opposed to the travelling roadshows. This has been an impetus for us holding exhibitions." Levi's postscript is that the message is filtering through slowly.

Efforts to promote Aboriginal art in public institutions have been hindered by the continued perception among American audiences of its ethnographic status, and in the current economic climate, where arts budgets have been severely constrained, institutions are reluctant to chance taking on a show that won't guarantee revenue. Levi hopes the upcoming exhibition of their collection at the Seattle Art Museum, which is being co-curated by McClusky and former NGA Senior Curator of Aboriginal Art, Wally Caruana, will break through this barrier.

Key to this is having a strong focus on art criticism. Early PR lauds it as "a major exhibition unlike anything seen at an American museum" and the accompanying catalogue will be published by Yale University Press. Levi and Kaplan are hoping for some federal government sponsorship for the exhibition and its possible tour, including related educational events and symposia, and visits by artists. Australian Ambassador to the US, Kim Beazley and US Ambassador



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to Australia, Jeffrey Bleich, are both honorary patrons. The museum believes "their role is significant in validating the importance of this landmark exhibition and Seattle Art Museum's ongoing commitment to bringing modern and contemporary Australian Aboriginal art to the forefront of public attention".

To date the federal government has sponsored very few major touring shows to the USA, the NGA's *Culture Warriors* being the most recent exception in 2009.⁸ More common is support for touring Aboriginal art to Australian embassies and High Commissions through DFAT in partnership with Artbank, the national organisation devoted to acquiring contemporary art and making it publicly

available for rental. Most recent tours, however, have largely focused on Asia and the Pacific and the diplomatic circuit won't generate the same profile as a significant public institution.

The US still holds the world's major wealth and is the greatest source of potential new collectors for Aboriginal art. More government effort needs to be made to shore up the long-term health of the Aboriginal art sector, which has suffered dramatically from the fallout of the GFC in comparison to the non-Indigenous art sector. In the interim, we can be grateful for the passion of collectors such as Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan who've become de facto cultural ambassadors for Aboriginal art in the US. ■



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