Peter Sutton, ed., *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia.* New York: George Braziller, 1988. Pp. xiii, 266, maps, color plates, line drawings. US$65.00 cloth.

*Reviewed by Robert Layton, University of Durham, Durham, UK*

This brilliantly illustrated book, coauthored by the editor and Australian colleagues, was produced to accompany an exhibition of indigenous Australian art displayed in New York, Chicago, Melbourne, and Adelaide between 1988 and 1990. It is much more than a catalogue, consisting of a series of essays on the place of art in indigenous Australian culture, its history since colonization, and a review of the ways in which indigenous Australian art has been evaluated over the past century by people trained in Western traditions. The book is directed primarily at readers relatively unfamiliar with the art but also presents some original ideas and previously unpublished data.

Key concepts in indigenous Australian culture are explained through helpful case studies: the foundation of religious tradition in a creation period (the so-called Dream Time), ownership of legends and art motifs, aesthetics as the manifestation of ancestral power. While indigenous art may display some continuity with rock engravings claimed to be thirty thousand years old, it has not been static. Examples of recent innovations from various parts of the continent are documented. For many years, anthropologists and craft advisors have intervened in the production and distribution of paintings and carvings. This influence is critically assessed.

The numerous color plates, on the face of it, speak for themselves, and the authors' definition of art is that of "meaningful signs" or "intentionally meaningful forms." A pervasive theme, however, is that much of the dialogue between the producers and interpreters of the art has been at cross-purposes.

A few years ago, two of the authors (Jones and Sutton) organized an exhibition in Adelaide of carvings produced early this century by people of the Lake Eyre region. In their accompanying catalogue Jones and Sutton questioned whether the carvings (called *toas)* stemmed from a long-established tradition or were an innovatory response to a local missionary's zeal for collecting artifacts. Given this problem, they chose to display the *toas* against a plain, black background, so that viewers could bring their own perceptions to bear rather than be influenced by the objects' original context in the squalor of an outback settlement. It is perhaps ironic that the organizers were criticized for doing so by the art philosopher Donald Brook, who accused them of revealing a "gemstone" approach to art that assumed objects have intrinsic, formal aesthetic qualities that exist independently of context and can be made more accessible by isolating the object within a frame. Brook demanded

to be told what it was about the *toas'* indigenous context of use that made them art for museum curators. A curious reversal of the traditional roles of anthropologist and art critic!

Not only does this volume redress the balance, it demonstrates that the artists themselves have generally sought to address an exotic audience through the work that leaves their community. Occasionally, perhaps, indigenous Australians were unaware that their way of life was under scrutiny. Jones quotes Tindale's recollection of his early expeditions: "I don't think that the bush ones in the early days ever realized that we were making records of them. They had no idea why white men held boxes up to their eyes" (p. 153). Anderson and Dussart write, however, that today Warlpiri "are not surprised others are interested in their acrylic paintings . . . [and] want to learn about their culture. Nor do they find it exceptional that whites will pay high prices for the privilege of seeing their ritual designs on canvas" (p. 132). An interest displayed by fieldworkers or collectors typically resulted in an "efflorescence of artifact production, which sometimes even inspired new forms of Aboriginal art" (p. 153). The Aboriginal chairman's preface to the catalogue of a 1981 exhibition wrote of helping other people "to see this country in the Aboriginal way" (p. 177). The gap between "traditional" and urban artist is thus to some extent closed: one has a message to convey about an identity founded on rights to the land that are mediated through ancestral tradition, the other a message about the struggle to combat racism or death in custody. The renaissance of indigenous culture in rural areas following the failure of assimilation policy is shown to have provided urban artists with new images of their own distinctive identity, as in Melbourne-based Lin Onus's painting Tracks (fig. 214).

To achieve a measure of recognition, however, indigenous artists have had to struggle against a long and unpalatable history of misreading, well summarized by Jones in chapter 5. Western scholars began by placing indigenous Australian cultures on the bottom rung of a supposed evolutionary ladder, denying that they had art at all, merely "decoration." The frequency with which types of objects appeared in collections reflected European interests, with weapons overrepresented during the era of colonial expansion, when indigenous resistance was frequently construed as treachery. As late as 1948 one critic was able to write, "A good test of art for art's sake is landscape painting. Generally speaking it does not occur in primitive art" (p, 171). Of course the growth of Western interest in exotic art, spearheaded by artists such as Gauguin and Picasso, ultimately tipped the balance, although initially the art of Africa and Oceania attracted more interest than that of Australia.

Nonetheless, by 1924 an Australian newspaper reported of an exhibition of bark paintings in Melbourne: "many of these are the work of the fierce Alligator River tribes, whose artists evidently include Cubists and Impressionists" (quoted on p. 167).

Ultimately, as the book's final chapter shows, the tables were turned, and artists of colonial descent began to seek inspiration for a genuinely Australian art in indigenous traditions. The authors distinguish between what they term "quotational" use of indigenous motifs, which merely appropriates forms, and references that take up issues of common concern, such as damage to the environment by a cultural tradition that lacks a close spiritual identification with the land. Recognition of indigenous art has in turn transformed aspects of Aboriginal life. On the positive side, artists have gained a degree of economic independence that has fostered a return to small, self-sufficient communities and supported claims for land rights. Traditions in the heavily colonized areas of southeast Australia that had ceased or whose continuation was precarious have been regenerated: the lower Murray Valley is taken as a case study. Artists have mastered new media, such as printing and pottery. On the negative side, disputes have arisen about rights to use designs transmitted by inheritance and the revelation of secret religious knowledge. Traditional statuses have been undermined and art forms modified in response to political pressure. What is clear is that Aboriginality in art is not manifested in isolation from Western contact, detachment from the market economy, or exclusive use of indigenous materials; it is rather in the construction and reconstruction of a distinctive identity in the modern world.