Indigenous Australian Latter-Day Saint Dot Art: A Convergence of Tradition and Faith

Katie Loveless
ktsunshine19@gmail.com

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Indigenous Australian Latter-Day Saint Dot Art:

A Convergence of Tradition and Faith

Katie Loveless
In the October, 2018 General Women’s Session of General Conference for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, President Russell M. Nelson extended a prophetic plea to the women of the Church to aid in the gathering of scattered Israel. President Nelson petitioned, “My dear sisters, we need you! We need your strength, your conversion, your conviction, your ability to lead, your wisdom, and your voices. We simply cannot gather Israel without you.”

This invitation specifically addressed to women within the church, came just a few months after the prophet issued an invitation for youth to take a special role in gathering scattered Israel. This emphasis to gather the tribes of Israel “from the four corners of the earth” implies that conversion will take place in even the most diverse areas of the world.

Perhaps one of the most remote locations of church membership is Angkula, Australia. Located in the Northwest Territory of Australia outside of Alice Springs, Angkula has been the homeland to Aboriginal people for centuries. These Indigenous Australians, known as the Arrernte people, carry on many of the cultural traditions and beliefs of their ancestors. For example, the Arrernte people speak their native dialect of Arrernte. Additionally, like other Indigenous Australian tribes, the Arrernte people believe the ideology of “The Dreamtime,” known as Altyerre in the Arrernte language. Christine Nicholls, Senior Lecturer at Flinders University, explains The Dreamtime, also known as the Dreaming, in her writing, ‘Dreamtime’ and ‘The Dreaming’ – an introduction:

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1 Russell M. Nelson, “Sisters’ Participation in the Gathering of Israel,” Ensign or Liahona, November 2018, 68.
2 Isaiah 11:12 (KJV)
The (Dreamtime) is an all-embracing concept that provides rules for living, a moral code, as well as rules for interacting with the natural environment… (The Dreamtime) provides for a total integrated way of life… The Dreaming isn’t something that has been consigned to the past, but is a lived daily reality… As a religion grounded in the land itself, it incorporates creation and other land-based narratives, social processes including kinship regulations, morality and ethics. This complex concept informs people’s economic cognitive, affective and spiritual lives.5

This belief system, which has permeated every aspect of the Arrernte peoples’ lives, has suffered major opposition throughout its history. The colonization of Australia, beginning in the late 1700s lends a haunting history of racism and persecution meant to breed out Aboriginal people and their cultural identities.6 Many Indigenous Australians have been forced to leave their homelands as a result of colonization. Because Dreamtime ideology is specific to tribal homeland, once a community is displaced, so is their identity. This displacement of Indigenous Australian identity throughout all of Australia is an issue at the forefront of present-day Australians and its government.7

With this background of violence and hostility toward Aboriginal Australians as a product of western colonization, it is understandable that there are varying feelings and responses regarding Christianity within Indigenous Australian tribes. For the Bird family, native Arrerntes living in Angkula, their family hierarchy have chosen a flexible way of synthesizing western culture with their belief in Altyerre (Arrernte Dreamtime). For example, many Bird family

7 Ibid.
members encourage the learning of English. Additionally, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has a strong presence in their community. Maggie Bird, who was baptized in 1997, recounts that “When (the) missionaries (were) coming around in my uncle’s house… one of (the elders asked) if I (wanted to) become a member and I said yes because I (felt the) Spirit. Then (the) whole Bird family (became members).”

As the gathering of Israel continues to be fulfilled, those being gathered may feel conflicted as they try to synthesize a new identity – one which accepts gospel truths while simultaneously cherishing their native culture. Prophets have taught “to bring our faith and talents and knowledge—all that is good in our lives and our individual cultures—with us and let the Church ‘add to it’ through the message of the gospel.” The Bird family’s conversion may seem insignificant when compared to the populous of the church, but their ability to adopt Christianity while still maintaining a belief in the all-encompassing Dreamtime cultural identity is a perfect model of being gathered into the House of Israel and becoming a converted follower of Christ.

Many of the Bird family, including Maggie, are professional artists - recognized and sponsored by local art centers in Alice Springs. As Aboriginal Australian artists, the Bird family primarily creates dot art depicting Altyerre, the dreamtimes specific to their Arrernte tribal heritage. Dot art, a sacred method of communication for Indigenous people, has been traditionally reserved for male tribal members for the purpose of creating symbolic ancient "dream" narratives only to be understood by indigenous Australians. Several members of the

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8 Interview with return missionary Jaren Meldrum, November 11, 2020.
9 Maggie Bird, Facebook message to author, April 18, 2020.
Bird family have begun to create artworks incorporating both Dreamtime elements with Latter-Day Saint specific stories and narratives. This new development within Angkula is not only significant to members of the Bird family, but to art historians as these paintings represent a new movement of artwork within Indigenous Australian dot art.

The subject matter and permission to create Aboriginal art have only recently expanded as contemporary artists have used their artwork to express ideas outside of the Dreaming realm. The use of generic Christian themes and narratives within Aboriginal Australian art is a developing contemporary art movement across Australia. While the Dreamtime narrative has elements of mythology and pagan beliefs and at its core is not intrinsically religious, Aboriginal artwork incorporating elements of Christianity with Dreamtime bridge a vast cultural gap between western people and Indigenous Australians.¹² For example, there are very few scriptural translations (including the Bible) in Indigenous dialects. One artist, Karina Napangardi Penhall, painted large pictures of Bible stories on the walls of the Lutheran Alice Springs church to help teach Bible stories to the people who couldn’t read.¹³ The ability for Christians to communicate unspoken truths through art is a beautiful advance within Aboriginal art and should continue to be studied and documented by those interested in the history of Indigenous Australians and art historians.

Specifically, the dot art being created by the Bird family in Angkula deserves attention as a visual microcosm of the larger movement happening worldwide as church members converge beliefs with cultural tradition. While it is difficult to put into words what the worldwide gathering of Israel looks like, the art created by the Bird family paints a deeply symbolic picture

¹² Jaren Meldrum, 2020
¹³ Louise Sherman and Christobel Mattingley, Our Mob, God’s Story: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists Share Their Faith (Bible Society Australia, 2017), 88.
of this idea. These men and women living in the Bush of Australia, are pioneering a new movement of artwork within the realm of Latter-Day Saint artwork.

One significant aspect of dot art is recognizing there are different levels of meaning when trying to understand the purpose of the symbols and dots. By doing so, artists have kept certain portions of Dreamtime that secret from outsiders.

The first level of meaning relates to the physical appearance of the work of art, and includes the materials, composition, and colors… The second level of meaning corresponds to the physical depiction that the work of art conveys. Dot paintings depict the natural landscape that is connected to the stories of the Dreamtime… The third level of meaning represents the ceremonies that show the journeys of the Dreamtime ancestors. On the fourth and deepest of the levels, the pictures depicted contain specific, spiritual knowledge that is known only to insiders of the tribe.¹⁴

Recognizing that there are layers of meaning within this type of art allows people not of Aboriginal Australian origin to develop some basic knowledge regarding the culture of these Indigenous people. For members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, a new level of meaning is added to these pieces of art that only someone familiar with Latter-Day Saint doctrine would understand. This additional layer of symbolism is a major stylistic development in the realm of contemporary dot art.

Much of the Latter-Day Saint themed dot art created in Angkula is gifted to local missionaries in appreciation for their service. Because of this, very few people outside of those

who have visited the remote village of Angkula, Australia know that this artwork exists. The Church History Museum owns a few pieces of Indigenous Australian church art, but unless someone already has exposure to this style of art, few would recognize its meaning or know the origins of its creation. As this artwork historically has been used to pass along important cultural narratives from generation to generation of Indigenous people, it can be used by Latter-Day Saints to communicate and appreciate a diverse minority group of church members.

Tanya Bird’s, *The Gathering of Israel* (Fig. 1)\textsuperscript{15} created in 2008 is just one example of this oeuvre of dot artwork depicting Latter-Day Saint narratives. In interpreting the complex patterns and symbols used to create this piece, it is helpful to look at each level of meaning potentially represented. This piece of art was created by using acrylic paints on canvas. Many Indigenous artists use paintbrushes as well as sticks to create dots and symbols for their paintings. Additionally, the acrylic colors chosen for this particular piece are primarily black, yellow, white and green. There are also varying shades of pink, purple and ochre - a common color in the landscape of Angkula, Australia.

The second level of meaning within this piece applies to the topography of Angkula. Aboriginal dot art often depict an aerial view of the land – as if the artist was standing on a hill or mountain looking out at the land below.\textsuperscript{16} The small dots often represent the spinifex bushes which cover a large portion of Australia and are dominant in Arrernte lands.\textsuperscript{17} The allusion of circles and swirls, painted by spacing individual dots closely together possibly correspond to watering holes or sacred ancestral sites members of the Arrernte tribe would be familiar with.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{15} Michael VanderDoes, Facebook message to author, October 18, 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Jaren Meldrum, 2020.
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\end{footnotesize}
through their Dreamtime knowledge. The dashes connecting the swirls and circles represent a directional movement. In the example of watering holes, these dashes would be the flow of water connecting sources of water throughout the land. Likewise, if the circles or swirls represent sacred sites, the dashes could depict the path of people traveling to ceremonies. Additionally, the fruit, vines and bugs depicted on the outer edges of the piece are specific foods eaten by locals in the area. These foods presumably are what has sustained the Arrernte people for centuries in the Northern Territory bush region of Australia.18

The next level of meaning depicted in Tanya Bird’s piece shows a series of narratives important to Dreamtime teachings. This includes specific Altyerre that are specifically important to Tanya Bird’s own beliefs and which support her personal testimony of the gathering of Israel doctrine. The fourth level of meaning would be understood by members of the Bird family who would be familiar with specific Altyerre ideology as part of their tribal understanding. This level of meaning would be regarded as sacred and therefore something only an Arrernte Australian would recognize.

This particular piece of art, and all dot art relating to narratives teaching church doctrine add a fifth and final level of meaning to be further studied. Within The Gathering of Israel, the level of symbolism specific to church doctrine is perhaps the most important level of symbolism within this piece. The largest symbol, which is centered in the piece of this painting are two U shapes— one within the other— painted in bright white and yellow. Traditionally in dot art, the U shape represents a person sitting cross legged on the ground, as if someone was looking down at the person on the ground.19 In this particular painting, the Father and Son are embodied as the

19 Ibid.
two connecting U shapes which would literally depict Christ’s words when he says, “I am in the Father, and the Father in me…”20 The Holy Spirit is also shown as the white loose brush strokes emanating out of the central figures of God and Jesus. The Spirit, which disperses the teachings of Christ, presumably travels to the people (represented in U shapes) facing or coming toward the Godhead. These people come in four different directions and form a cross shape, which is further emphasized by thick yellow brush strokes which separate the groups of people converging toward the Godhead.

This cross, which is formed by the followers of Christ emphasizes beautiful truths about the Atonement. Each follower of Christ makes up a portion of the suffering Jesus experienced while on the cross. Additionally, each U shape as a part of the cross is literally fulfilling Christ’s command to “take up his cross and follow (Him).”21 The dots which fill in the space between each individual depicted, make this piece applicable to those familiar with the spinifex bush landscape in Angkula. Tanya Bird could have seen herself and her family members among the spinifex bushes of their village as they make their own efforts to follow the teachings of Christ.

As mentioned earlier, the swirls and circles relate to landscape details (bodies of water or sacred ceremonial sites). The four oblong shapes converging from the four corners of this painting to the central figures of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit could be representative of the four corners of the earth being gathered.22 The spirituality of land and nature is fundamental to Dreamtime beliefs. In fact, land is meant to be seen as something that is treated as a living thing and could rationally be understood to be part of the gathering of Israel, since it is also a creation of God and will house those who are righteous in the next life. The landscape symbols depicted

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20 John 14:11 (KJV)
21 Luke 9:23 (KJV)
22 Isaiah 11:12 (KJV)
with great detail and in miniature dots and strokes were created in this way to represent a vast area of land. The four areas of land are very different from one another and represent the variety of landscapes across the world.

Another possible interpretation of the four oblong shapes could be the four texts which make up the standard works – the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price, and the Doctrine and Covenants. These scriptural texts each relate to various groups of God’s people throughout history and recount narratives of people coming to Christ. In a sense, this interpretation could show the gathering of Israel from an eternal perspective – the gathering which has taken place from the beginning of the creation of Adam and Eve. This interpretation would support the Dreamtime emphasis on creation, as something without beginning or ending.

Finally, this highly symbolic painting is surrounded by bush food, as mentioned above. These stylized depictions of physical sustenance complement the spiritual nourishment which is given to the people depicted in this painting by the message of the gospel, radiating from the Godhead. *The Gathering of Israel* uses simple lines and dots to create a narrative which overcomes time and space to provide a visual representation of the gathering of Israel, prophesied by Christ. This depiction is all inclusive to people, region, time and space. Yet it also portrays the conversion of Tanya Bird, her beliefs in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and speaks of her ability to reconcile her ancestral heritage with her newfound faith in Christianity.

In October 2006 General Conference, President Nelson stated, “The choice to come unto Christ is not a matter of physical location; it is a matter of individual commitment. People can be “brought to the knowledge of the Lord” without leaving their homelands… The Lord has decreed the establishment of Zion in each realm where He has given His Saints their birth and
nationality.” Church narrative dot art created by members of the Bird family in Angkula, Australia is a fulfillment of this prophecy.

While this new movement of art is significant within the arts and art history scope of study, it is also valuable to Latter-Day Saints looking for examples of conversion within minority groups of the Church. In the future it would be beneficial to document and record the history of the Bird family and their artwork. Where there are few records kept for Indigenous Australians, this information would be unique to the Indigenous culture and beneficial for saints in the future. The Bird family is pioneering a new style of Latter-Day Saint art and Aboriginal dot art which has the potential to expand cultural acceptance and understanding of a minority populous in the church. It is deserving of praise, recognition and understanding especially for historians and artists who have membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.
Figure 1: Tanya Bird, *The Gathering of Israel*, 2008.
Bibliography


Isaiah 11:12 (KJV)


John 14:11 (KJV)

Luke 9:23 (KJV)

Nelson, Russell M. “Sisters’ Participation in the Gathering of Israel.” Ensign or Liahona, November 2018.


Collection of Female Indigenous Australian Latter-Day Saint Artwork

Katie Loveless
Numina Kamprina, *Scripture Cover.*

Contributed by Michelle Williams-Pearce.

Contributed by Fe Mae Garrote.
Colleen Wallace, *3 Nephi 11 Christ Coming to America.*

Contributed by Jaren Meldrum.
Colleen Wallace, *Tree of Life*.

Contributed by Jaren Meldrum.
Contributed by Judy Roberts Kilgore.
Louise Webb, *Joseph Smith Talking to Heavenly Father and Jesus.*

Contributed by Clint Wirick.

Contributed by RebeKah Green.
Contributed by Daniel Kroll.

Contributed by Michael VanderDoes.

Submitted by Michael VanderDoes.

Submitted by Michael VanderDoes.
Colleen Wallace.

Contributed by Matthew Mcknight.
Contributed by RebeKah Green.

Contributed by Kalin Taylor.

Contributed by Kalin Taylor.

Contributed by Kalin Taylor.

Contributed by Kalin Taylor.

Contributed by Kalin Taylor.