

Deaconess Winifred Hilliard and the cultural brokerage of the Ernabella craft room

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Deaconess Winifred Hilliard arrived at the Presbyterian Ernabella mission craft room in far north-west South Australia in 1954 to work as a qualified missionary. She was 33.¹ Her job: to work among Pitjantjatjara women as the ‘handcraft supervisor’ at the mission.

The art history of Ernabella (Pukatja) is arguably the last neglected narrative of first-generation, postcontact Indigenous art-making among Australian Western Desert peoples. The history of Papunya Tula artists, a painting movement begun in 1971 by men in association with a white male cultural-broker, has become ubiquitous shorthand for Western Desert art.² The beginnings and practices of the Hermannsburg watercolour artists, begun by men, has enjoyed a revival of interest.³ The influence of Ernabella art made by women remains obscure, a mere footnote to this art history.⁴ The role of its long-serving female art-broker and the influential intercultural brokerage role carried out by Hilliard is surely germane to this.

1 According to her own CV dated 1982, Hilliard took a handcraft course after schooling at the Presbyterian Ladies College in Melbourne. During the war, she joined the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and worked as an aircraft instrument repairer and then as a handcraft adviser to those awaiting demobilisation. She trained as a Presbyterian deaconess and, after further handcraft teaching work including in a slum parish of Melbourne, she was invited in 1954 to become the handcraft adviser at Ernabella. Winifred Hilliard, CV, Ernabella Arts Archive.

2 For example, Bardon and Bardon 2006; Johnson 2008, Myers 2000; Perkins and Fink 2000.

3 For example, French 2003.

4 See McLean 2016 for a recent example. I do not intend here to engage explicitly with the agency of the artists, which was considerable and which has been discussed elsewhere. See for example Eickelkamp 1999; Young 2001, 2011.

In 1968, Hilliard published a book called *The People in Between*, which detailed the Pitjantjatjara peoples' experience of life before and after the establishment of the Ernabella mission. Pels and Salemink query the distinction made between academic anthropologists and other ethnographic practitioners under colonial rule. They note the importance of the practical relationships between observed and observers and their transformations by the representations of ethnography.⁵ In her role as craft adviser, Hilliard was working in the same space as Anangu and was, as she explains in her book, incorporated into their kinship system. Hilliard was not a professional anthropologist but – at least initially – a professional missionary. In publishing a book about the missionised subjects of her daily work, she was following in a long tradition of missionaries who are also ethnographers and writers. She later published many essays and gave public lectures about the Ernabella craft room, all of which are imbued with her ethnographic voice and her experience over decades of immersion in local Indigenous life of understanding and speaking Pitjantjatjara fluently.

Hilliard's book has been cited as trustworthy ethnography by many scholars, including anthropologists.⁶ As I will argue, Hilliard's authority as an ethnographic writer amplified her leverage as a broker.

Hilliard's working life corresponded with significant changes in Australian Government attitudes as assimilation policy was revised into one of self-determination for Indigenous peoples.⁷ During the first half of her time at Ernabella, she was caught between the Presbyterian mission's financial angst, which was freighted with a morally authoritative work ethic, and the need to satisfy the expanding desires and interests of the craft women – women for whom settlement life and the culture of white people were both novelties. In 1974, after the handover of the community governance from the mission to Anangu, the Ernabella craft room became incorporated as Ernabella Arts and gradually 'the craft girls' became 'the artists', although many older women continued to refer to the 'craft room' into the late 1990s. Hilliard's later years were post-mission, during the struggle by Anangu⁸ for control and governance of their country, culminating in the *Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act 1981* (SA). These years were relieved by the introduction of government subsidies for Aboriginal art and craft production and marketing. By the 1980s, the Ernabella art centre business, in addition to the cultural and social roles it played, was at last flourishing. After Hilliard's retirement, she continued to write articles and essays, and was invited to give talks about Ernabella art. This material remains the

5 Pels and Salemink 1999: 1, 4.

6 Some examples include Berndt 1970; Bell 1980; Cowlshaw 1978; Cane and Stanley 1985; Eickelkamp 1999; Young 2011; linguist Goddard 1991; Gould 1969; Hamilton 1980; Anangu themselves – Minutjukur and Osborne 2014; and historians Kimber 1990; Trudinger 2010.

7 Toyne and Vachon 1984.

8 Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people came in later years to call themselves Anangu, meaning 'black people', something that Hilliard deplored because, she told me, she understood this word as meaning all people in 'classical' precontact Pitjantjatjara. Hilliard, pers. comm., 1997.

primary source of information about the art movement's history. I knew Winifred Hilliard during this period of her life: from 1997, when I started anthropological fieldwork near Ernabella, until her death in 2012.⁹

Hilliard's determination, her spiritual, emotional and practical devotion to the people and institution of the craft room long after the mission had gone were seemingly a major endearment to Anangu. Most non-Aboriginal staff come and go so regularly. By the time of her last visit to Ernabella for the 60th anniversary of the art centre in 2008, those former craft girls sat at her feet, wanting their photo taken with her. Their shared life experiences mean that Hilliard represented their pasts too, a link to dead mothers, sisters, aunts.

At the time of my initial fieldwork near Ernabella, 'Miss Hilliard time' was frequently referenced by the women I worked with who had been craft girls in their youth or had continued to work in the art centre. Other researchers had been working with them on their art and its history.¹⁰ At the time of Winifred Hilliard's Ernabella funeral some 15 years later, Hilliard's time was deemed *iriti* (a long time ago) – a term I understand as meaning on the cusp of social irrelevance to the present.

Hilliard's influence, as a white woman and intercultural broker living and working for more than three decades in an Aboriginal settlement in the Western Desert, has also been critically under-explored to date.¹¹ Writing of M.M. Bennett, Holland asks how was it that she could speak for Aboriginal women's liberation. 'What made Bennett's critique unique for its time was the fact that she identified and linked the gendered and racialised outcomes of colonial rule.'¹² Hilliard, an admirer of Bennett, at least for her craft teaching at Ernabella, never got as far as framing this linkage explicitly in her writing, tending instead to portray a general humanitarian concern for Aboriginal peoples' achievements and the lack of appreciation that these received in colonial Australia.

An industry

A mission station must have an industry, to provide work and help to finance the cost of caring for the natives.¹³

The 36-year history of Ernabella mission is a distinct one. During the 1973 preparations for handover of governance to Anangu themselves, the mission stated its five interlinked goals as spiritual, economic, educational, social and political.¹⁴

9 I became the consultant curator for an exhibition in 1998, held at Tandanya in Adelaide, of the 60th anniversary of Ernabella Arts and I visited her at her home to research this.

10 Eickelkamp 1999.

11 But see Schulz 2011 on Christian goodness as disempowering Anangu at Ernabella.

12 Holland 2005: 150.

13 Love 1937.

14 The aims, goals and methods of an Aboriginal mission, a preliminary paper 1972, Ara Irititja Archive d90661, three pages.

The mission's economic rationale rode in the first instance on the sheep's back. Ernabella was already established as a sheep station when purchased by the church in 1936.

Ernabella shared over the years many of the same experienced staff, both on the ground and at management level, from the Board of Ecumenical Missions, with other Australian Presbyterian missions: at Aurukun in the north-east on Cape York Peninsula, at Mornington Island in the Gulf country, at Mapoon founded in 1892 and at Kumunya founded in 1910 in Western Australia's Kimberley. Ernabella is, comparatively, in the vastness of central Australia, geographically close both to Hermannsburg, the first mission in central Australia, which was set up by the Lutherans in 1887, and to the United Aborigines Mission at Warburton established in 1934. Dr Charles Duguid – Adelaide surgeon, Ernabella mission advocate and policymaker – framed the Ernabella mission project within a more liberal approach to the Christian conversion of Aboriginal people and to their education than any of these missions.¹⁵ By offering Aboriginal people the option to become Christian, the mission saw itself as providing them with salvation¹⁶ in inevitable future contact with the colonial culture.

There were no dormitories at Ernabella and schoolchildren were taught in the Pitjantjatjara language. The mission opened a school in 1940. 'Another policy', wrote Hilliard's contemporary schoolteacher Nancy Sheppard with some irony in her later memoir of that time, '– and one we especially believed justified our exalted opinion of ourselves – was the use of the Pitjantjatjara language for all day to day communications, evangelism and education.'¹⁷ The mission had rules about behaviour and time. Ledgers in exercise books, of names against which hours worked and ration entitlements were inscribed, including the 'craft room roll' and the 'spinner's roll', were kept by the craft supervisor.

Hilliard and the craft workers operated within the Board of Missions' paradigm of skilful industriousness. 'Training of men and women in technical skills with opportunities to use them profitably, thus leading to individual enterprise and more settled life'¹⁸ was a tenet of the Ernabella staff council constitution in 1948, providing the foundation to promote the gradual introduction of commerce and consumption amongst Anangu.

15 Kerin 2011.

16 Trudinger 2004.

17 Sheppard 2004: 10.

18 'Ernabella staff council constitution' in Ernabella mission general secretary's visit 1948, Board of Ecumenical Missions and Relations (BOEMAR) records.

The people in between

It is through her book *The People in Between: The Pitjantjatjara People of Ernabella* that wider audiences know Hilliard and the Ernabella mission. Written in an engaging, accessible style, the book has endured rather better than Duguid's more polemical books.¹⁹ Unlike Dr Duguid, who never lived long-term at Ernabella, Hilliard, living in The Oleanders, the single women's house at the mission, had no 'unfailing critic and help meet in a wife'.²⁰ She wrote to Duguid in 1961 telling him of her plans ('I want to show as much as possible of the life of the people before white contact and the effects of contact of the various types'), listing some source materials that she wished to consult for research purposes for her book; these included books by the Mission Board's Reverend J.R.B. Love and anthropologists – the Berndts, Basedow, Spencer and Gillen. 'Local people are keen on the idea', she wrote of her book plans.²¹

Her writing did not attempt new ethnographic theory but extolled to the reader the undisputed humanity of the Pitjantjatjara by detailing multiple aspects of their lives. In one chapter, she discusses the spiritual life of Anangu, but efforts towards pleasing God she implicitly conveyed as being more valuable in keeping with the Mission Board's policy – which was, after all, her employer.²² She was reminded by the BOEMAR²³ secretary that profit from sales of her book was mission income. The funds would not go to 'special projects' but to the greater good of the mission project.

The book boasted an ambivalent introduction by Ted Strehlow, the son of the Hermannsburg Lutheran missionaries. Strehlow was intent on recording the secret ceremonies of men and collecting their ritual paraphernalia. In choosing Strehlow, Hilliard perhaps wished to transcend the women's angle in her book.²⁴ He compares Hilliard's book favourably with Daisy Bates's book *The Passing of the Aborigines*, the latter, he notes, being 'riddled with inaccuracies'.²⁵ For Strehlow, Bates and Hilliard are connected as being women who each lived with Pitjantjatjara people for many years. Aram Yengoyan, who had carried out research near Ernabella, reviewed the book for *American Anthropologist*. His review was generally favourable and praised her impartial account of the mission, although he criticised her incomplete account

19 Duguid 1978 [1964], 1972.

20 Duguid 1978 [1964]: frontis.

21 Winifred Hilliard to Dr Charles Duguid 1 May 1961, handwritten letter, BOEMAR records.

22 Hilliard 1968: Chapter 10.

23 Board of Ecumenical Missions and Relations.

24 Marcus 2001: 173.

25 Strehlow 1968: 11.

of male initiation, knowledge she would have been excluded from.²⁶ Nevertheless, with these male endorsements, Hilliard's research and ethnographic reportage was validated.



Figure 1: Page from an Ernabella mission handcraft leaflet c. 1963. Text and illustrations attributed to Winifred Hilliard.

Source: Ara Irititja Archive.

26 Yengoyan 1969.

Hilliard devoted only one later chapter – out of a total of 17 – to ‘women’s work’: the craft room history and activities, with mentions of health work in the mission clinic, housework in the missionary’s quarters and cooking for the mission canteen. It is this chapter that lays the foundation for her own future accounts of the craft room – and virtually all others that follow. She had already sketched this narrative in various brochures she prepared to accompany the craft room price lists. Her tiny drawings of Anangu carrying out work embellish early examples.

Anangu informants whom she acknowledges at the front of her book are Gordon Inkatji, Watulya Baker and Nganintja, three individuals whom the mission regarded as great successes and role models for other Anangu. Hilliard uses their accounts and that of other Anangu to evoke Pitjantjatjara life before the mission. She did not, by and large, use their precontact lives to legitimise the mission project.

‘The Mission that grew with its people’, Chapter 11 in her book, describes how in manifold small and large ways the Ernabella mission was superior to others of its kind, and to government settlements and cattle stations, which also functioned as government ration stations. Although she was a little critical of the mission, the book is holier than thou in tone. Noting that the ‘native Australians’ had been ‘invaded’ in 1788,²⁷ Hilliard spent the first six chapters detailing the European explorers who travelled through ‘Pitjantjatjara country’ to show who, in the way of Europeans, the Pitjantjatjara had encountered, thereby positioning Anangu as part of white Australian history.²⁸

The mission is inevitable in both Duguid’s and Hilliard’s writing. She employs the oft-quoted phrase that prefaced mentions of the Ernabella mission as a ‘buffer zone’ (which perhaps came from Duguid) between encroaching settlers and the great North Western Aboriginal Reserve where Aborigines still continued their hunter-gatherer lives. The people who came into the mission travelled mainly from this reserve area.

She mentions the ‘artistry’ of the Pitjantjatjara as evident in their bough shelters, in their elegant hand signals and timber tools, and in their sense of colour. Her aim was to emphasise that the Pitjantjatjara were not just human but good and morally upright, worthy of support. They do not, she writes, lend their wives, nor eat each other. One has the sense that she was didactic to forestall criticism and ignorant questions about people for whom she had immense affection and respect. This tendency increased in her writing as the years passed.

She also needed to market the things that the craft room workers produced and, as I will discuss below, much of her writing is about educating that market not merely for monetary gain but garnering appreciation for, and advancement of, firstly the mission and latterly the Aboriginal craft women.

27 Hilliard 1968: 27.

28 Attwood 1989.

The Ernabella craft room narrative

The story of the craft room that Hilliard relates in her book is a tightly nested narrative that recurs again and again. It is repeated in Hilliard's own writings and in press coverage of Ernabella artists' work throughout her time as craft adviser so that one imagines this is what she relayed to reporters. It outlived her tenure and appears long afterwards in the accounts of subsequent art advisers, and in catalogue essays. Indeed, it requires effort to write anything about Ernabella that does not borrow from it. The veracity of Hilliard's narrative is buttressed by the accepted ethnography of her book. Its authority is augmented by the fact that the Ernabella mission refused most requests from professional anthropologists to conduct research at Ernabella. The narrative unfolds by withholding as much as it gives way.

During the early 1940s, the mission's nurse and female schoolteacher taught the women attending bible class to knit jumpers and make raffia hats for themselves. Realising that spinning was a native skill, the mission arranged for Mrs M.M. Bennett of Kalgoorlie to visit Ernabella in 1948 for six weeks and teach four older women to adjust the tension of the fibre in order to successfully spin white wool, that novelty animal hair. Mrs Bennett also taught four younger women to weave wool on a four-shaft loom. Hilliard mentions the names of all these women – Nguringka, Nyirpiwa, Kukika and Dolly – indicative of how *The People in Between* is so reliant on insider knowledge. It is from this date, 1948, that the craft room is born in future accounts, though Hilliard later corrects its actual start to January 1949.²⁹ The mission's own 1944 records say 'the girls are not secluded as the young men are, and they are open to our guidance and suggestion. We could at once ... begin some handcraft work with them'.³⁰

A new schoolteacher, Miss Baird (later another Mrs M. Bennett), arrived, who had knowledge of weaving and taught more young women this skill. Along with weaving, the 'craft girls' made floor rugs using knotted dyed wool that had been spun by their mothers and aunts from bales of Ernabella-grown wool. The designs for these rugs were chosen first by mission staff from the schoolchildren's pastel drawings³¹ and later were purpose-designed by the girls. There was painting with watercolours of the distinctive Ernabella imagery, the *walka* (Pitjantjatjara) that Hilliard glossed as 'design'. The cane and raffia basketry was not successful. There was moccasin making with introduced kangaroo skins stitched and painted by the craft women, and Gobelin tapestry weaving that was unpopular with the majority of craft girls. It was the men who were responsible for shearing the sheep and sorting and baling the wool before it was sent on the mission truck to the rail head 200 miles away at Finke.

29 Hilliard 1992, 1994.

30 Rev. H.C. Matthews secretary of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia to Mr R.M. Trudinger, 4 August 1944, typescript, BOEMAR records.

31 Young 2011.

In an earlier chapter of *The People in Between* describing the Ernabella school, Hilliard introduced the origins of the *walka*. The teacher, a novice Pitjantjatjara speaker, instructed the children to draw with their pastels and paper ‘*kura kura*’, which meant ‘rather badly’ instead of ‘anything’ as he had meant to say, and the enigmatic *walka*, emblematic of Ernabella, was born. It is the *walka*/designs that are the distinctive component of much Ernabella art and craft work. It is these that Hilliard was to broker and promote. She traced the *walka* back to sand-drawing practices; although, at the end of her life, Hilliard doubted this as an explanation for them.³² Her earlier account is embedded in the commentary on Ernabella.³³

The Ernabella *walka* was a child’s or girl’s art.³⁴ Unlike the later Papunya Tula painting by men, it was not positioned as a statement of power, nor as culturally crucial knowledge. In the anthropological stereotype of Aboriginal women lacking ritual power, it is young women, in accounts of precontact life, who are construed as especially powerless. These young women, if thought of as art producers, were the antithesis of the Papunya Tula men, whose ground paintings and ceremonial designs are continually invoked as the basis of their mark making on canvas. In her writing, Hilliard never mentions women painting up their bodies for ceremony, although she certainly saw and participated in these events. She was dismissive of these women’s ceremonies in *The People in Between*.³⁵ This was a crucial aspect of her understanding of the Ernabella craftwork, I suggest. As I have argued elsewhere, Hilliard underestimated the spiritual importance it had for its makers because they did not speak of it.³⁶ She did, however, understand the cultivation of individual imagination that went into each girl developing her own *walka*.

At the end of 1971, the Indonesian technique of batik was taught to the Ernabella craft workers by another teacher – a young American man named Leo Brereton. Radically, he was not a member of the Church – a harbinger of a new era at Ernabella. The application letter to fund his visit, signed by all the leading craft women – Patjiparan, Nyukana, Tjikalyi, Yipati, Tjuwilya and Tjunkaya – explained that they aimed to produce dress lengths for the tourist trade, for export and for Australian consumption.³⁷ In Hilliard’s later written accounts, public lectures and articles, 1971 became another critical date: a ‘part two’ of the narrative because it marked the start of batik making by the craft workers.

Subsequently, Hilliard helped the women save from their wages to enable three young women – Jillian Rupert, Nyukana Baker and Yipati Kuyata – to visit the batik research institute in Yogyakarta for three weeks in 1975, to learn directly from Indonesian batik masters. On their return, they taught their new knowledge to other

32 Hilliard, pers. comm., 1998.

33 For example, Ryan 1998.

34 Eickelkamp 1999.

35 Hilliard 1968: 123.

36 See Young 2011, 2017.

37 Letter to the Director, Dept of Education and Science from Ernabella craft workers, 22 October 1971, Ara Irititja Archive d90614.

craft room workers. Another batik teacher, Vivianne Bertelson, visited Ernabella later in 1975 and taught wax recipes and more dyeing and waxing techniques. With this added gift of skill, a new energy and freedom enabled the batik to ‘take off’ among the craft women. By now, some of the daughters of the original craft girls were employed in the craft room too, having worked there after school. There were more trips by Hilliard accompanying various batik artists – especially Nyukana Baker and Yipati Kuyata – to Africa and Japan. ‘The arts are where cultures meet’ she would write later,³⁸ embodying her own experiences as well as those that she brokered for the artists.

In Hilliard’s account, these eras were created by the craft girls’ access to new (non-Aboriginal) teachers who introduced novel materials and skills. However, she was also careful, both in her book and in her later writing, to report how the craft girls owned the techniques that they learnt and wanted to pass them on to children.³⁹ My own fieldwork and that of others, with the same women decades later, corroborates that this is exactly what happened.⁴⁰ This was also the mission’s aim for Anangu: upskilling, training, enhancing their self-confidence and their own techniques to be as good as, or even better than, white women. Watching and imitating was, and is, the way in which Anangu learnt. Becoming fluent in new media gave them freedom to experiment and influenced the way that they worked in other media.⁴¹ These ways of knowing through making offered the craft girls the possibilities for imaginative improvisations with the new materials and techniques.⁴²

Skill and faith

In a craft room report written in 1966 addressed to the Board of Missions, Hilliard wrote:

in continuing with the weekly bible study for baptized women and in organising the weekly women’s meetings I have endeavoured to bring home the ethical character of the gospel. This is carried over into the work in the craft room or in any other sphere of employment where it is essential to stress that a task well done is an act of worship.⁴³

The connection of skilful work to spiritual fulfilment was a central one for the mission’s Christianity. There is a chapter in *The People in Between* entitled ‘Spiritual work’ and, despite Hilliard’s insistence – and notwithstanding Eric Michael’s

38 Hilliard 1983: 13.

39 For example, Hilliard 1968: 176.

40 See Partos 1998; Eickelkamp 1999.

41 Bennett 1998.

42 Knowing through making is discussed in Ingold 2013.

43 Winifred Hilliard, *Ernabella Handicraft. Annual Report 1965*, typescript, p. 2, Ara Irititja Archive 90351-2.

observation that nearly all art adviser's accounts are rife with contradictions⁴⁴ – that no instruction was given to the craft girls to constrain their ideas, it is carefulness, if nothing else, that I suggest she transmitted to them; carefulness as spiritually uplifting. The leading craft girls were declared Christians.

From the start of the craft room until the mid-1970s, the mainstay was woollen work. The craft workers learnt to hand spin, scour, dye and weave the sheep wool. Their weaving appears mimetic of European weaving to non-Aboriginal audiences. I learnt during my own research from some of the weavers how (at least in retrospect) miraculously novel and all-consuming it was for them as they learnt to count with coloured threads to create multicoloured, patterned textiles. There were shawls woven in 'Greek lace' patterns, in stripes and checks and in Scottish tartans, as appropriate for a Presbyterian mission.

Enabled by Hilliard and the Mission Board, various young craft women went to improve their weaving techniques at the Sturt workshops in Mittagong with courses that lasted up to 20 weeks. It was on her furloughs, leave away from the mission, that Hilliard sought out new media and teachers, so the Sturt workshops had a long relationship with the Ernabella craft room throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s.

The craft workers' woven wool could not, and still cannot, hold market interest because it does not apparently embody anything Aboriginal; it is seemingly an imitation without alterity. There was the demonstration of skill, but unless the buyer was a spinning connoisseur who could see the expertise inherent in the yarn fibre and weight, this too was lost. Hence, the information sheets that Hilliard created explaining that spinning, at least, was traditional. She did not, however, explain the importance of string for spiritual and religious purposes. With or without her essays, the weaving must have appeared to buyers as a clear example of successful assimilation.⁴⁵

Hilliard arranged spinning demonstrations by young women who spun amongst displays of the Ernabella craft room products at agricultural shows in Adelaide and Alice Springs from the early 1960s. These latter events, arranged through the Northern Territory's Aborigines' Welfare branch,⁴⁶ served as both marketing for the products – evincing that they were genuinely made by Aboriginal people –

44 Michaels 1994: 154–55.

45 Langton 2003.

46 Letter from L.N. Penhall, Assistant Director Southern division, Welfare branch to Mission superintendent, 3 March 1964, Ara Irititja Archive d90269.

and as marketing for the mission project. But they also imbued confidence in the demonstrators who learnt, Hilliard noted, that white people did not necessarily possess these skills.⁴⁷

In ‘the movement towards knowledge ... in these societies’, wrote anthropologist John von Sturmer, these are worlds ‘without coincidence, where nothing happens by accident ... knowledge is not so much a question of programming or instruction, but of attending, being present at ...’.⁴⁸ Hilliard and the craft workers kept up this demonstration template, of ‘being present at’; it was something they were accustomed to doing. Seeing might lead to understanding – an Anangu trope. They continued to demonstrate with batik in later years. Batik, too, was a complex process about which dealers and buyers harboured erroneous ideas, Hilliard found.

The batik ‘enterprise’, as Hilliard called it, was generated by a new era of self-determination for Aboriginal people. Mary White was the new craft adviser on Aboriginal projects to the Crafts Council of Australia in 1971. She wrote of the Ernabella *walka*, ‘I noticed that the designs they paint were slightly Indonesian looking and it occurred to me that they could be transposed to cloth ideally by introducing the girls to batik’.⁴⁹ Batik was the perfect portable medium for the self-determination era when more and more new homelands were established near or on sacred sites around Ernabella, some with their own craft sheds, so that batik could be made at home, as some artists continued to do into the late 1990s and beyond. Hilliard did not want to be the resident expert on batik so she never learnt the technique herself.⁵⁰

The problem of value

In *The People in Between*, Hilliard captioned the colour plate reproductions of *walka* paintings by various young women with the hours taken to complete each one. She told me in 1998 that she subsequently regretted doing this. She was responding to enquiries made of her by visitors to the craft room who would ask how long it took the girls to complete their work as well as the habitual exclamation ‘they’re clever!’⁵¹ As Hilliard’s immediate successor noted, it was production not marketing that was her problem. There was no way of charging sale prices that took account of the labour that went into the works.⁵² ‘Productivity’ was seen by the Mission

47 Other stall holders at the 1967 Alice Springs show were from Amoonguna, Papunya, Warrabri, Areyonga, Yuendumu, Jay Creek, Haasts Bluff, Hermannsburg and Santa Teresa; a mixture of missions and government ration stations. L.N. Penhall, asst director, Welfare Branch circular letter, 13 March 1967, Ara Irititja Archive d90355.

48 Von Sturmer 1989: 131.

49 Mary White quoted in 1972 *Craft Australia* article (vol. 2 no. 1 p. 5).

50 Hilliard 1993: 47.

51 Hilliard 1968: 208.

52 Carolyn Joske, pers. comm., 2008.

Board as the solution to the price constraints, in tandem with better marketing, and this knotty problem was often the angst-ridden subject of letters from the Mission Board to the craft adviser. The board directive 'Craft must pay' was the bane of Hilliard's life.⁵³

The 'expense' of the craft room was something that the board returned to frequently over the years. A 1958 memo reported on the fact that 'the Board of Missions had serious problems in maintaining Ernabella':

The craft room is a scene of activity. We could not but admire the artistic touch of those who were freely painting cards and those who were working pictures in wool. In trying to do something to give women an interest it is possible that this enterprise is carrying too much overhead expense. When it is considered remember that each woman in rations, wage, dress allowance and blankets costs at least 35/- (shillings) a week the business can hardly carry those who are not fully paying their way.⁵⁴

The craft room women were making goods for non-Aboriginal people to wear or decorate their homes. This positioning of their efforts as garments and soft furnishings meant that the prices charged could never adequately reflect the immense time and labour that went into each item. There was an erroneous impression, Hilliard noted, that Aboriginal people could not be innovative and Aboriginal works were expected to be cheap – but if from a mission, even cheaper.⁵⁵

The emphasis on skill in Hilliard's promotional writing created problems with value. Even though the work was made by, as her early mission handcraft labels put it, 'full blood aborigines', the skills that they used were introduced. Rather than being captivated by the 'sheer beauty' of the works,⁵⁶ audiences and potential buyers glimpsed this slippage in the Aboriginality of the work. Persuading them to change their mind was a preoccupation of much of her later writing in the batik era. 'The art from Ernabella', she wrote in 1993, 'did not conform to the public's perception of 'Aboriginal Art' or 'Aboriginal colours'. Aboriginal art should accordingly consist of bark paintings and have a story.

From the late 1960s to early 1970s, the craft room made increasing trading losses as it eased into a new era of government, rather than mission, subsidy. In 1968, it made a loss of \$1,428 that rose to more than \$11,000 in 1971 despite a subsidy of \$11,500 that year. The relationship of time to money in the craft room came to a head in 1973 when the minimum wage rose belatedly in the north-west reserve and necessitated a fall in craft workers to nine at a time when plans for a new craft

53 Nancy Sheppard in conversation with Diana Young, 2011.

54 Australian Presbyterian Board of Missions. Report of Inspection of Ernabella Mission Rev. G. Anderson and Rev. H.M. Bell in September 1958, typescript, BOEMAR records.

55 Hilliard 1983, 1994.

56 Hilliard 1994: 4.

building were in train.⁵⁷ Hilliard was quoted in *The Canberra Times* in 1972 as saying that the reluctance of Australians to pay good prices for Aboriginal art was exploitative. 'The tribe depend on the sale of their art for a living.'⁵⁸

Continuity of supply was always a challenge, as now the craft workers had many other social and cultural responsibilities that conflicted with 'work'.⁵⁹ The metropolitan retailers had no inkling of the ways of the bush nor that Winifred Hilliard was working an 80-hour week and hemmed the batik silk scarves herself at night.⁶⁰

Exchanges between Hilliard and retailers show that transforming the value of the Ernabella craftwork was almost impossible. It possessed none of the prerequisites for value transformation that Papunya Tula subsequently had in place.⁶¹ That is, it had no wide market recognition nationally or internationally and no real recognition as art in terms of price. It possessed no apparent spiritual connection, although Hilliard often referenced the colours in the *walka* as like the sheets of flowers in the artists' Country. There were few collectors of Ernabella work. There were belated acquisitions by state galleries of batiks in the early 1990s after Hilliard had retired, but little else. Art from Ernabella was not included in the influential *Dreamings* exhibition of 1988.⁶²

Marketing

Hilliard began her public writing career with explanatory labels for the goods she must market on the mission's behalf. So much explanation was required about the skills involved in making the products because the women did not provide any explanation of the designs. Instead, the craft workers *did*; they demonstrated skill and technique.

A 1960s label Hilliard wrote says the craft room:

aims to providing a viable industry in which the Pitjantjatjara women may be employed and ... develop their own indigenous skills, to use with newly acquired knowledge, in the production of high quality craft goods.

All wool used in the production of floor rugs and woven articles is hand spun by the women. The technique is their own ancient one.

57 *Ernabella and Fregon Enterprises*, report dated 16 July 1973, Ara Irititja Archive d90688.

58 *Canberra Times*, 10 July 1972: 3. It is unlikely that Hilliard herself would have used the word 'tribe'.

59 Austin-Broos 2009.

60 W. Hilliard to Adrian Newstead, 6 January 1982, handwritten note, Ernabella Arts Inc.

61 Myers 2000.

62 Sutton 1988.

The original designs for which the Mission is becoming increasingly well known, has been developed over the years with no interference except the provision of new materials.⁶³

In this emphasis on industry, the mission was ahead of its time. It was only in the 1980s that there was an Australia-wide move towards Aboriginal arts and crafts as an industry.⁶⁴ Hilliard's label lacked emphasis on the aesthetic properties of the work, her emphasis changing only later in the 1970s with the mission gone and encouragement coming from art and craft industry insiders to resituate the Ernabella work.

Hilliard offered a bespoke service to buyers. Although she hoped to deal only with wholesalers by 1973,⁶⁵ members of church groups and mission societies could easily write to her asking for the goods they wanted, anticipating a discount on the grounds of their faith. Winifred Hilliard replied to one such enquiry:

The prices we charge are only possible by underpaying workers with minimum incomes for ordinary workers at around \$100 per week. I think that you must admit that you get fair return for your money.⁶⁶

Responding both to the enthusiasm of the craft women for any particular medium and to market demand, Hilliard was continually adding and dropping 'lines' from the craft room. For example, 'tjuringkas' and 'kadaitche boots' (ritual murderer's shoes), specially made for the craft room, were a memory by the late 1960s. Writing often to the treasurer of the Australian Presbyterian Board of Missions to explain the current state of sales, by 1967 she noted the number of floor rug commissions that the Alice Show stall received (eight), whilst the small painted cards were 'passed over'.⁶⁷ In 1978, the Aboriginal Arts Board advised Hilliard that selling batik and painted burlap as 'wall hangings' tripled the price. In her correspondence of the early 1970s, Hilliard had already realised that 'utility lines' commanded a limited price, though she continued marketing the long batik cloths, the '*raiki wara*' ('long rags') as the artists called them, as 'lengths' that could be made into garments. Like the rugs and paintings, they were all priced by their size – by the metre for the batik dress lengths; 'the old crafts-pricing criterion of so much neatness per square inch' as Michaels puts it.⁶⁸ Only in the 1980s were the superb batiks marketed as 'art' or high-quality craft for hanging on walls, but it was not until the early 1990s, after Hilliard had retired, that state galleries in Australia began to collect them.

63 Undated Ernabella label text (early 1960s), Ara Irititja Archive d90642-2.

64 Myers 2002.

65 Winifred Hilliard to BOEMAR superintendant 'John' P. Brown, 22 March 1973, Ara Irititja Archive d90676 Collection of Ernabella Arts Inc.

66 Winifred Hilliard to Enid Bowden, 17 August 1976, typescript, Ernabella Arts Archive.

67 Winifred Hilliard to Mr Edenborough, General Treasurer Australian Presbyterian Board of Missions, 3 July 1967, BOEMAR records.

68 Michaels 1994: 146.

Attempts at breaking into an international interiors market for the functional items had never materialised, but with batik there came limited international marketing success through exhibitions in Osaka and East Africa and, just after Hilliard retired, in Houston.

Towards the end of her life, Hilliard became an established commentator on Indigenous batik since she had been part of its start. The National Gallery of Victoria in 1998 held a large show of this medium and other textiles to coincide with the 50th and 60th anniversary of Ernabella Arts and produced a lavish accompanying publication. Ignoring the creeping myth that the (male) Papunya Tula artists founded the Western Desert art movement and that, by then, had all but eclipsed Ernabella's endeavours, in her 1998 essay Hilliard referred to batik as an 'industry'. She did, however, espouse the Ernabella works as art and 'the first Aboriginal art form to develop beyond its old limitations into the beautiful and creative fabrics'.⁶⁹

Conclusion

If in the early mission days when Hilliard first arrived craftwork was a visible, tangible materialisation of mission industry, the positioning of it in this way militated against its market acceptance. As a cultural broker and ethnographer, Hilliard's extensive efforts at offering ways for the women to further their skill, and thus expand their knowledge, were met with price constraints and accusations of a lack of authenticity for their work.

For Hilliard, a task done well equated with spiritual transcendence. A certain neatness and control of the media was a part of this ideal and came to be the hallmark of Ernabella art works for many decades. If what really engaged her was technical process, in this she happened to coincide with the culturally embedded emphasis of Anangu who deem knowledge as a series of processes that must follow in the right order and in the right way to be effective.⁷⁰

Papunya Tula art, like the Ernabella craft room, was an intercultural experiment. Like Geoffrey Bardon, Hilliard did not see herself as central to the Ernabella arts history,⁷¹ but she did position herself within the narrative using her photo albums, collections and museum donations. On Bardon's influence among the Papunya Tula artists, Paul Carter has written: 'What distinguished Bardon from his well-meaning ideological contemporaries was his aesthetic activism'.⁷² Hilliard's aim was promoting an intersubjectivity for the craft women through skill acquisition. She

69 Hilliard 1998a: 37.

70 Young 2011.

71 Carter 2009.

72 Carter 2009: 106.

herself could draw, she took good photographs, she collected outstanding pieces of batik, but she did not position aesthetics as of primary importance in her brokerage of Ernabella art and craft.

She could recognise each woman's *walka* (if not quite as well as the makers recognise one another's) but she did not write about this as visual style or individual style in contrast to Bardon of Papunya art, with his emphasis on 'visual archetypes'. This lack of aesthetic emphasis is one reason that the Ernabella craft and art did not transform in value; it did not have keen wealthy collectors nor develop any widespread connoisseurship despite the quality control that Hilliard imposed upon it.⁷³ If there had been changes in art advisers at Ernabella, there might be different voices and new energy, as at Papunya Tula where each adviser has told their own tale.⁷⁴

Hilliard never attempted to suppress 'difference' in the enactment of her brokerage. Nor did she peddle primitivism. Later with batik she moved towards a modernist claim to universality through 'art'.⁷⁵ Post-mission from 1973–74 when the craft room became an 'art centre', batik as a medium erased the disadvantage of being a 'mission product', yet batik was still unstable in its Aboriginality as another introduced medium. Not until the 1990s did Indigenous acrylic painting transcend both nationalism and Aboriginality, according to Myers,⁷⁶ but batik has not quite made it through into this new space. There is no secondary auction market for batik. The current reverence for craft and the handmade and the influence of recent writing on making in anthropology indicate that perhaps a rethinking of early Ernabella craft is possible.⁷⁷

Hilliard's account of Ernabella's craft room is at once admirable and limiting. It left a vacuum for critical dialogue about what is a remarkable tale. The narrative of Ernabella art and craft that Hilliard constructed was based on new media and its teachers – a particular colonisation of technique that the Papunya Tula painters have transcended. The craft room was – and continues to be – stigmatised by the worthiness and stasis attributed to mid-twentieth-century mission production. The continued circulation of Hilliard's 1968 book, *The People in Between*, and its harvest of scholarly citations, ensure that the Ernabella mission and its colonial project is not forgotten and that, rather than being seen as an innovative, intercultural creative movement, the Ernabella *walka* is associated with this. In contrast, the rhetoric surrounding the male Papunya Tula painters, positioned as realising an almost revolutionary cultural imperative to express their secret sacred knowledge, is entirely different. Aboriginal cultural production is evidently promoted and constrained by

73 Myers 2001: 194.

74 For example, Crocker 1987; Kimber 1990.

75 Clifford 1985; Myers 2001: 39.

76 Myers 2001: 194.

77 Ingold 2013.

moments of nationalist sentiment that illuminate why one form is celebrated while another is ignored. Some historians have begun to critically examine mission histories but, in their efforts to promote contemporary art as expressive purely of sacred spiritual ties to country, Aboriginal art centre managers tend to distance themselves from this history. While some contemporary artists at Ernabella, notably Niningka Lewis, are portraying 'mission times' in their paintings, a revisionist history of the craft room is overdue.

Hilliard did give to the craft women and girls the possibilities for self-realisation and self-expansion, an intersubjective engagement with non-Aboriginal people.⁷⁸ As Marcia Langton writes, 'Aboriginality only has meaning when understood in terms of inter-subjectivity, when both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are subjects not objects'.⁷⁹ This engagement was not just invisibly mediated by their work but made in person at technical demonstrations. While it would be easy to dismiss these technical demonstrations as evidence of a colonial panoptic 'making visible', it was also a way for the craft women to engage with onlookers.⁸⁰

It was through art that Hilliard saw possibilities for the education of non-Aboriginal Australians who had never met an Indigenous person.⁸¹ Despite working mainly with women, Hilliard did not emphasise femaleness in her writing. For example, in a lecture given in Osaka, she said:

Significantly it was the Aboriginal who stepped over the cultural boundaries when Albert Namatjira portrayed his lovely homeland in European style art. It was then that the white population looked beyond its own boundaries and began to see.⁸²

According to recent data, the majority of artists working today in remote Australia are women.⁸³ Some of these women worked in the craft room at Ernabella and recall this in published accounts of their lives as artists.⁸⁴ The skills that they learnt in the craft room are relevant to the art they make today – weaving skills are relevant to *tjanpi* (spinifex basketry and sculpture); batik techniques have been transferred to ceramics. Today, the top-earning artists on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands are senior men with their ability to access and portray their own sacred knowledge in their work. While increasingly women also position their cultural production as sacred,⁸⁵ the price realised for it in the market rarely equals that of their men's.

78 Langton 2003: 119.

79 Langton 2003: 118.

80 Pinney 2008 quoting Mitchell 1988: 33.

81 Hilliard 1983: 13.

82 Hilliard 1983: 13.

83 Acker and Woodhead 2015.

84 For example, in the accounts in Tjala Arts 2015.

85 Young 2017.

In keeping the bureaucratic structure of the craft room going throughout the lean years and into the era of self-determination, Hilliard made employment for women an enduring success at Ernabella, whereas employment for men was more problematic. These were young women ‘born in the bush’, as they would characterise themselves to me and to other outsiders. In the Ernabella craft room and later art centre, through Hilliard’s brokerage and care, they had the time and space to create and define their changing selves in a new environment with novel materials. This was Hilliard’s major contribution, strengthened by her determination and her affectionate commitment to Anangu at Ernabella.

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