

DREAMTIME BOOM TIME

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Aboriginal art is "coming of age" in Europe, following a series of exhibitions in the most reputed modern art galleries. HELEN PITT reports.

WHEN France's first scientific expedition set out for Australia in 1800, with the leading names of French science aboard, they could hardly have imagined that the fruits of their labour would simply disappear.

Like Napoleon Bonaparte, France's renowned Emperor, the precious collection of Aboriginal artefacts brought back from the voyage fell into the hands of her imperial Majesty, Marie Josephine.

And like Napoleon, they were soon lost.

"This was a great scientific loss," said Mr Roger Boulay, the curator of Paris' Museum of African and Oceanic Arts.

Although there were British settlements in Australia at that time, and other French boats had departed before in search of the lost explorer, La Perouse, this was the first voyage commissioned to bring back Aboriginal objects to France.

Very few people know about this loss, according to Ms Sylviane Jacquemin, attache to the museum. She has written her university thesis on the Aboriginal artefacts held in Parisian museums.

"This was very precious material, and we have absolutely no trace of the collection," she said.

"All we know is they were last seen in Josephine's chateau."

According to the inventory of the four-year voyage kept by Francois Peron, the French Government's naturalist and zoologist of the time, the collection included several spears, a greased braid of hair painted in ochre, a boomerang (which Peron described as a "ricocheting sabre from Port Jackson - a terrible arm and until this day completely unknown"), several clubs, a fishing hook made of shell, a model of an Aboriginal boat and two shields which belonged to Bennelong, the "Chief of the savages of Sydney" (as Peron described him).

However, curators at the Louvre Museum in Paris decided not to display the objects because they were not considered "art". Instead they were put aside, to be placed in a specially created anthropology museum.

The anthropological museum never got past the planing stage and the objects were presented to Napoleon's wife Josephine, to be put on display in her castle, Malmaison, on the outskirts of Paris. They were never seen again.

The story of the missing artefacts is one of the many unveiled at the Paris Museum of African and Oceanic Art's current exhibition, *The Paintings of the Aborigines of Australia*, which runs until November 15.

The museum houses over 400 Aboriginal art works and is considered to have the most important collection of bark paintings in Europe. A permanent staff of three care for the museum's bark-painting collection, though none of them has been to Australia.

"There is a lot of literature written by Australian preservers of bark paintings which the staff use," said Mr Boulay.

"They have attended special schools for art preservation to understand the special conditions required for preserving and repairing bark paintings."

Since his first visit to Australia in 1988, Mr Boulay has had regular contact with Australian museums and has returned on numerous occasions to Arnhem Land and central Australia.

The current collection of bark and acrylic paintings and sculptures is dedicated to the memory of Karel Kupka, a Czech-born anthropologist who collected a large number of the museum's works.

From his first journey to Australia in 1951 until his death in January this year, Mr Kupka wrote a number of books on Aboriginal art and a thesis called *Aborigines: the world's anonymous artists*.

Mr Kupka was regarded as the leading expert on Aboriginal art in Europe. He collected many hundreds of works for Paris museums and Switzerland's Museum of Ethnology in Basle during his many trips to communities in Arnhem Land, the Central Desert and the Kimberleys.

The current exhibition has been very successful, according to Mr Boulay, "especially with the Parisian public who have never thought of Aboriginal art as contemporary art.

"The debate in the Parisian salons over whether this (work) should be viewed as traditional artefacts or contemporary art annoys me. At least (in the current exhibition) they can see that these people are living artists producing living art."

Ms Lyn Tuit, the director of the Australia-France Foundation, says French interest in Aboriginal art has manifested as a "mini-boom" this year. In September and this month alone, four Aboriginal art exhibitions have been scheduled in regional centres throughout France.

This interest seems to be a trend in Europe, following the success of Aratjara (the Messenger), the biggest Aboriginal art exhibition to be held in Europe. The 150 paintings and sculptures were exhibited for three months in Dusseldorf, Germany.

They are now in London's Hayward Gallery and will return to Australia for another three months' display at the Victorian National Gallery. The caretaker and curator of the exhibition, Djon Mundine (who organised the collection of 200 burial poles which stand in the National Gallery in Canberra), says the response has been staggering.

The significant aspect, he said, was that "Aboriginal art is going not only to contemporary art museums, but to the best (such museums) in Europe" (the Hayward Gallery in London and the Kunstsammlung in Dusseldorf.)

"Many Europeans get a surprise when they learn that the artist is still alive, or when they see my black face and it is not a living artefact," he said.

"This exhibition aims to teach people about the human relations in the painting, not just the dreaming stones."

Mundine feels Aboriginal art is finally coming of age outside Australia. "It is finally losing its patronising European tag of 'native art'."

Alongside the Aboriginal art exhibition at the Museum of African and Oceanic Art, is a display of photographs. First Peoples, a set of 27 photographs, are the result of four years' labour by photographer Jon Lewis on his journeys through northern Australia.

They are not as pretty as the paintings in the adjoining room. They include a photograph of a drunk Aboriginal woman in front of a Power's beer sign, and a number of Aboriginal men whose eyes are clouded with trachoma.

They are not "comfortable to look at", in the words of an Australian Embassy employee in Paris. But according to Lewis, whose exhibition of Bondi photos is still touring France after four years: "It is debunking the idea that the noble savage still exists in paradise, which a lot of European people still believe.

"My photos show reality, whether they be Aboriginal people or people who go to the beach."

Curator Mr Boulay said Jon Lewis' photographs provided people "with a modern picture of Aborigines that makes them more real than (do) the paintings".