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How Aboriginal artist Dave Malangi's design ended up on Australia's money

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The accidental theft of an Aboriginal artwork helped create the dollar bill and ushered in the era of decimal currency to Australia.

The Australian $1 note features Aboriginal artwork, including a painting by David Malangi.

A camel, according to conventional wisdom, is a horse designed by a committee. We've had our share of camels born of committees in Australia, but the Currency Note Design Group, convened in 1963 by the governor of the Reserve Bank, H. C. "Nugget" Coombs, wasn't one of them.

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On the 50th anniversary of Australia's successful switch to decimal currency, it's worth commemorating how the design group, charged with designing Australia's decimal banknotes, came up with the equivalent of a Melbourne Cup winner.

An image of the Queen appears on one side of the $1 note.

The committee comprised seven individuals. Three of them – the director of the Art Gallery of NSW, Hal Missingham, and graphic designers Alistair Morrison and Douglas Annand – didn't put pencil to paper, but acted as mentors to the others.

It was these four – Richard Beck, George Hamori, Max Forbes and Gordon Andrews – who did the grunt work, labouring alone on their individual sketches. Despite the element of competition, the group evidently worked harmoniously. It was a panel of experts and Coombs expertly let them get on with it.

Andrews was declared the first among equals by his fellow committee members in April 1964. His designs were a triumph. They were distinctive, modern and brightly coloured. They acknowledged the past and celebrated science and the arts. They didn't take the easy route to popularity; there were no soldiers or sporting heroes; there was no Don Bradman.

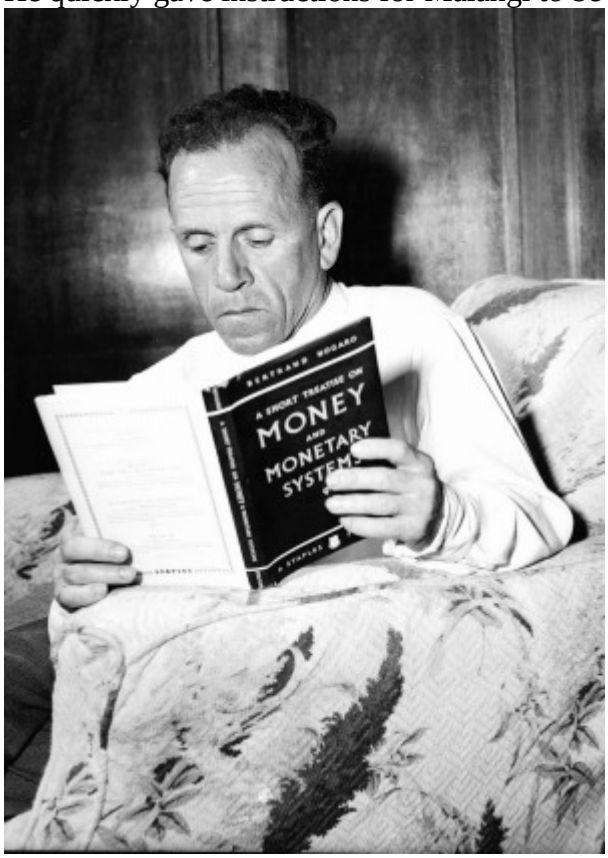
So appealing were they that the nation accepted them with alacrity and soon bestowed on them the greatest of all Australian compliments: nicknames. (A lobster – as the $20 bill is sometimes called – was also known as a "red drinking voucher" on my teenaged Saturday nights.)

But even this highly effective committee didn't get everything right. On one side of the $1 note is a portrait of the Queen, looking very regal, decked out in the Order of the Garter. The other side, by contrast, is adorned with three examples of Aboriginal art.

In the top right of the banknote are stick-like hunters – known as mimi figures – derived from the cave paintings of the Nalbidji people in western Arnhem Land. Below these figures are a kangaroo, a goanna and a snake, rendered in the X-ray style, also taken from the rock art of western Arnhem Land. These images are of unknown age and were first encountered by white Australia, in the form of anthropologist Charles Mountford, in 1948. The rest of the design is a copy of a bark painting from eastern Arnhem Land depicting the mourning rites of the Manharrnju clan.

There was just one small problem – the artist who produced this bark painting was very much alive. What's more, another painting of his – *Food Pattern of Trees (Rain and Raga Tree)* – had been acquired by Missingham's own institution, the Art Gallery of NSW, as early as 1962.
His name was David Malangi Daymirringu and he was a Yolngu man from Arnhem Land. Malangi had played an unknowing role in the Currency Note Design Group's work but no one had thought to let him know – or pay him.

When the story broke in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, Nugget Coombs – a man with a sincere and lifelong interest in the welfare of Australia's Indigenous people – must have been mortified. He quickly gave instructions for Malangi to be recognised and compensated.

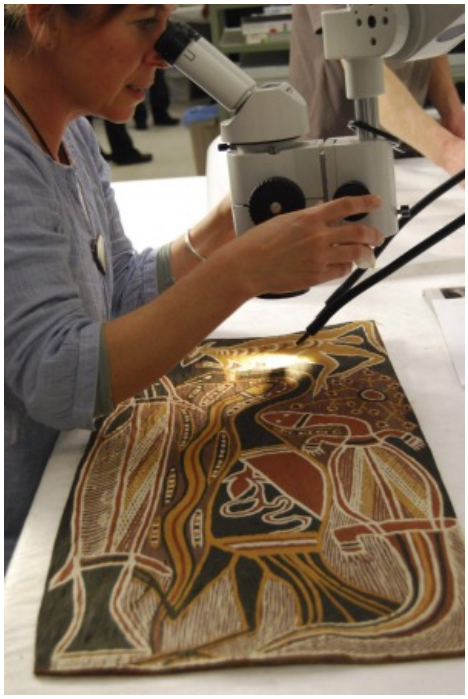


Dr H. C. "Nugget" Coombs convened the Currency Note Design Group. Photo: Sun News

In 1967, after consulting with the artist, Coombs travelled to the Northern Territory and gave Malangi an engraved silver medallion – "To commemorate his contribution to the design of the Australian $1 note" – along with a fishing kit (including a tackle box) and $1000, which the artist used to buy a tinny with an outboard motor. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship between the two men.

Honour was served and justice – finally – done, and for the rest of his life, Malangi was rightfully proud of his role in the design of the $1 bill and was happily known as "Dollar Dave".

Malangi continued to paint, and is now recognised as one of Australia's greatest artists. His work was exhibited widely in Australia and overseas. In 1996, the Australian National University awarded him an honorary doctorate. A major retrospective of his art was mounted by the National Gallery of Australia in 2004. He died in 1999, at the age of 72.



Conservator Chloe Bussenschutt works on a bark painting by David Malangi, Totemic Animals. Photo: Mitch Preston, National Museum of Australia

So how did Malangi's art make its way into Andrews' design? The story Harold Holt – or another of Robert Menzies' ministers, William McMahon, or perhaps both of them – had seen the work in a French museum and recommended its use in the new design is apocryphal. The truth is a little more complicated.

As the historian David H. Bennett describes it in the journal *Aboriginal History*, a Hungarian art collector and anthropologist named Karel Kupka, who did indeed work for the Museum of Arts of Africa and Oceania in Paris, met Malangi on one of his many collecting trips to northern Australia and acquired the bark painting. While still in Australia, Kupka gave a photo of the work to A. C. McPherson, secretary of the Reserve Bank, who passed it on to the design group.

It was an embarrassing episode, but much good came of it. The mistake – and its rectification – is credited with kicking off the debate about copyright law and Aboriginal art. It is harder today for Indigenous artists to be ripped off – in part, because the Reserve Bank did the right thing 50 years ago.

This is an edited extract from an essay published in insidestory.org.au.