

## PREFACE

The material on which this study is based includes the collections in the Australian Museum, Sydney (AM), the National Museum of Victoria, Melbourne (NMV), the Queensland Museum, Brisbane (QM), the South Australian Museum, Adelaide (SAM), the Western Australian Museum, Perth (WAM),<sup>1</sup> the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (UP), field studies in North Australia,<sup>2</sup> and published sources. In the aggregate a vast quantity of material is thus available for study. Nevertheless it must be recognized that the evidence is still insufficient for more than a preliminary consideration of many aspects of Australian decorative art. In only a few localities has art been investigated by ethnologists with the result that our knowledge of certain important aspects such as technical procedure, design analysis and symbolism is decidedly meager. The museum collections contain excellent representative series of certain types of specimens from some localities but very few specimens from others. Hence for certain important types of decorated objects or design motifs we often are in doubt as to how to interpret the lack of information for specific localities.

Such difficulties are less troublesome in respect to objects with incised designs than to those with painted patterns. The permanent character of the former is responsible for this condition, for such specimens can be collected at any time of the year. Thus since a large percentage of museum specimens has been gathered at random by lay collectors incised objects are relatively numerous.

The reverse condition is found in respect to painted objects. Not only are Australian pigments easily obliterated by handling or weathering, and therefore are of a tempo-

<sup>1</sup> The Australian Museums were visited during 1930-1931 under a Fellowship Grant by the Social Science Research Council of New York.

<sup>2</sup> In behalf of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania.

rary character, but in many regions they are applied principally for ceremonial occasions. Objects with such derivations thus can be collected only at the conclusion of the ceremonies. In addition, in some localities certain painted sacred objects are destroyed immediately after use. Hence, although our knowledge of painted designs for several areas is fairly satisfactory for others it is negligible.

Lastly there is the difficulty of treating objects or designs represented only by a single example or by a very few specimens from a single locality. These may be either local eccentricities or variants of more standard widespread forms present in but not reported for neighboring areas.

For the present study the writer has devoted most attention to those types of decorated objects and design patterns which are, geographically considered, of major continental or regional significance and has treated only in passing certain types of specimens or motifs which, possibly because of insufficient information, appear at the moment to be of local character and importance.

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