This exhibition investigates a series of murals that once decorated the walls of the Adelaide Children’s Hospital.
Contemplating the Walls: Forgotten Murals of the Adelaide Children’s Hospital

This exhibition remembers two sets of significant murals that once animated the walls at the old Adelaide Children’s Hospital (ACH) to improve the hospital experience for children: the ‘Australiana’ murals completed in 1945; and a landscape mural painted on the Susanne Ward in 1978. They were both community projects led and predominately implemented by women artists, and both projects acknowledged Aboriginal people, though each from different perspectives. Presented together, the murals spark a conversation about changes in the recognition of Aboriginal art and culture in the years that passed between them.

In the 1940s, when the ACH Board approached the Art Gallery of South Australia seeking to commission murals to brighten the walls of an Outpatients’ hall and x-ray room, Director Louis McCubbin recommended local modernist Dorrit Black as lead artist. Assisting Black were Shirley Adams, Victor Adolfsson, Jacqueline Hick, Mary Shedley, Erica McGilchrist, and Jeffrey Smart.

Despite the absence of Aboriginal artists in the group responsible for the 1945 artworks, Aboriginal themes are strongly present. So what sparked this focus?

At the time the murals were painted, Mrs CRJ Glover was Vice President of the ACH Board. Her late husband, Adelaide’s first Lord Mayor, was a collector of Aboriginal artefacts and ‘Australiana’ books for their home. Written by white authors, these books were a popular information source for non-Aboriginal people interested in Aboriginal culture. If the personal interests of its administrators did influence the specifics of the Hospital’s commission, the archives are not telling. The Hospital line reads: “we decided that, rather than have Mickey Mouses and Donald Ducks, we would have something with a typically Australian theme ...” (News, 23 January 1945). Elsewhere the subject choices were attributed to the artists. Probably they were given freedom in interpreting the ‘Australian’ brief.

The artists’ primary aim was to distract and entertain their young audience. Did they consider the Hospital’s Aboriginal patients? We may never know. Considering that Adolfsson contributed an animal alphabet, and other murals had story themes, it looks as if the artists treated the hospital walls like the pages of a children’s book. They probably chose Aboriginal material due to broader influences on art trends.

The 1945 murals were painted at the end of World War II. Nationalism was at a high. Engaged in the nation’s efforts to define an identity distinct from that of Britain, artists were exploring Australian society, history and mythology. Modernists including Black looked to Margaret Preston, who since the 1920s had advocated for the incorporation of Aboriginal art in visual design. On 31 July 1945, the Sydney Tribune declared student murals painted for the Southern Cross Servicemen’s Hut “particularly meritorious as the artists have used an aboriginal motif for decoration...
which shows what can be done with our indigenous culture in this respect”. That same month, SA Homes and Gardens Magazine carried a spread on the ACH murals, quoting McCubbins’ praise for the artists’ Aboriginal themes. While it was thought appropriate – even desirable – in this era for artists to use material from a culture to which they did not belong, the practice is now considered problematic and a form of appropriation.

Some of the ‘storybook’ walls created at the Hospital in 1945 bear the influence of stories in public circulation at the time. The largest mural in Outpatients, the Legend of Creation, is Dorrit Black’s interpretation of an Aboriginal creation story. The text in her design reads as though inspired by a chapter in W Ramsay Smith’s (1930) collection of Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines. Another of her murals depicts the landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay. This design choice probably reflects the promotion of this event as the start of the nation. Children’s folklore constructed Cook as a hero in the great colonial ‘discovery of Australia’ narrative. That was the story then. Now it is widely recognised that the narrative of discovery, and terra nullius, are the myths.

The 1978 artwork was also brought into being in response to a commission from the ACH, this time brought directly to the Aboriginal Community College nearby in Brougham Place. The Hospital wanted an Aboriginal-themed mural in order to make the Susanne Ward more welcoming for Aboriginal children, especially those from remote regions.

On one wall, Aboriginal student artists Noeline Casey, Betty Newchurch and Phoebe Wanganeen painted a naturalistic desert scene in the style of the western landscape tradition, but from an Aboriginal perspective. The photos show that this mural dominated the enclosed ward space, virtually immersing the small patients in a scene of distant country, brought inside. In common with all the 1945 murals, to delight the children, their composition featured native animals.
Both the 1945 and 1978 murals have unexpected significance in South Australian art history. Gavin Malone has argued that artists have been the main instigators of visibly including Aboriginal people in public space. He determined that markers of Aboriginality were absent in Adelaide’s public art until non-Aboriginal artist, Geoffrey Shedley, installed The Rainmakers sculpture at O’Sullivan Beach in 1965. This exhibition reveals that not only did the ACH host artworks with Aboriginal content predating this, but Mary Shedley was on the team who painted them – two decades before her husband Geoffrey sculpted his work. While largely forgotten now, the 1945 murals were seen by hundreds of thousands of patients in their formative years.

The 1945 artists’ murals can therefore be interpreted as an early form of public recognition of Aboriginal people on a large scale in Adelaide. Some of their designs actually depicted Aboriginal people. Despite this, the artwork painted on the Susanne Ward in 1978 was more representative of Aboriginality. Malone believes this particular mural qualifies as one of South Australia’s first known artworks expressing Aboriginality in a public space as created by Aboriginal people themselves.

The 1978 mural was enabled by changing conditions and attitudes in Australian society and its art world. The Freedom Ride of 1965, 1967 Federal referendum, Aboriginal Tent Embassy (1972-) and other factors increased public awareness of, and support for, Aboriginal culture. The political environment in South Australia was conducive; Labor Premier Don Dunstan was supportive of Aboriginal self-determination and of the arts. Art by Aboriginal people had gained visibility since the dawning of the Aboriginal Art Movement earlier in the 70s, attributed to activities in Papunya (NT). By the time the Susanne Ward mural was conceived, Australia had an annual National Aborigines Week (now NAIDOC Week). Its theme in 1978 was: ‘Cultural Revival is Survival’.

Christopher Reid has discussed how local art in the 1970s was influenced by Feminist and Postcolonialist movements,
which challenged society to consider the identities of women and Aboriginal people from their perspectives. Modernist art lost favour -- it did not lend itself to political expression, and had excluded Aboriginal artists. South Australian artists shied away from painting in general, in favour of other media. Reid identifies two exceptions to this: (1) mural work; and (2) Australian landscape painting, provided it addressed society and culture. As a painted mural of an Australian landscape, created by Aboriginal women, the 1978 Susanne Ward artwork occupies a logical niche in Adelaide’s art history.

Adelaide had a strong mural movement. The local chapter of the Women’s Art Movement (WAM), established in 1976, promoted mural making in their advocacy for greater collaboration among women and community participation in art. Helen James, the non-Aboriginal art teacher who worked with the students on the Susanne Ward, was an active WAM member. Her teaching contribution at the Aboriginal Community College may be one manifestation of the WAM’s change in agenda, in the late 70s, to support Aboriginal women more. The College itself aimed to provide Aboriginal students with the freedom and resources with which to express themselves about their heritage. Its founding Principal, John Ingram, described the institution as a place where “Aboriginality receives absolute respect”.

The Susanne Ward mural was painted in the wake of some key breakthroughs achieved by the Aboriginal Land Rights Movement. In 1975 Whitlam handed back title to the Gurindji. In 1976 the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act was passed. 1978 was the year Dunstan introduced legislation to recognise the traditional land rights of the Pitjantjatjara people. According to Reid, a community that illustrates a building is making a statement about its relationship with that building’s owners, using the artwork to “reclaim citizens who are lost, alienated, ‘homeless’”. The 1978 mural may not be readily identified as political. But in depicting a landscape, it may yet have been a statement about land rights: at its most basic, it was a warm message from Aboriginal women to Aboriginal children that this hospital space was their space too. Aboriginal artists have used mural painting to exchange culture with non-Aboriginal people. We might imagine this mural also spoke to the non-Aboriginal children on Susanne Ward, feeling anxious and far from home themselves.

The collaboration between Aboriginal student artists and a non-Aboriginal art teacher on the Susanne Ward mural can be seen as a small act of Reconciliation. It was an outcome of the Hospital’s greater gesture of Reconciliation in approaching the Aboriginal Community College with the mural commission. The mural was a sign of a closer relationship starting to grow between the ACH and Aboriginal communities, with the Hospital taking greater consideration of culture and kin in working with young Aboriginal patients.
This mural survived perhaps a few years. In 1997 Derek Mitchell, the Executive Officer of the College (now known as Tauondi) wrote to the Women’s and Children’s Hospital. Coming up to the 20-year anniversary of the Susanne Ward project, he reflected back upon it as “an affectionate exercise between the Hospital and the College”, and expressed interest in a similar undertaking. Although this did not come to fruition, other collaborations with Tauondi have, and the will for this kind of conversation – through art – lives on through the Arts in Health Program at the Hospital today.

*Emily Collins, Curator and Museum Consultant, WCHN History and Heritage Collection*

**Bibliography**


The old murals featured images of lots of different native Australian animals.

**Draw your favourite Australian animal:**

**Show us your drawings!**

Post a photo of your design on Facebook or Instagram and tag @wchfoundation
This exhibition was planned and exhibited on the lands of the Kaurna People and we pay our respects to the Kaurna Elders past and present and to the Elders of the lands this brochure reaches.

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History and Heritage Collection

The Women’s and Children’s Health Network has a collection of historical artefacts which is managed by the WCHN History and Heritage Group. This was originally formed as the ICONS Group in 1995 by retired Adelaide Children’s Hospital Staff. The WCHN History and Heritage Group aims to preserve, collect, collate, catalogue, store, display and interpret items of historical significance to the Women’s and Children’s Hospital and its predecessors the Adelaide Children’s Hospital, the Queen Victoria Hospital and associated institutions.

Women’s & Children’s Hospital Foundation Arts in Health program

The WCH Foundation Arts in Health program coordinates five galleries in the Hospital, providing a space away from the stresses of treatment to distract, entertain and inspire, improving the visual environment. The Arts in Health programs integrate art into the life of the Hospital to improve people’s health and wellbeing. We try to make the environment more ‘child-friendly’, making it look better and helping to make the time spent in hospital ‘feel better’. The Yellow Heart Gallery provides a platform to share the WCHN History and Heritage Collection with the Hospital community and explore the significant people and events that shaped the Hospital today.