

# Gwoja Tjungurrayi as ‘One Pound Jimmy’: Aboriginalia in the post

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**Abstract:** Postage stamps act as ‘tiny transmitters’ of nationalist and colonial ideology due both to their capacity for movement and as sites of official, state-sanctioned visual propaganda. The representation of Aboriginal people and motifs on stamps in mid-twentieth-century Australia are visual clues that reference shifts in thinking about nation-building from the interwar to the postwar period. Stamps provide a concentrated visual snapshot of the tense and unstable positioning of Aboriginal people both within settler imagination and the Australian nation during this period of change. Changing understandings of the place of Aboriginal people within Australia resulted in the proliferation of visual representations that drew upon earlier colonial visual language, and hence images of Aboriginal Australians form their own moving historical trajectory, as mobile as the postage stamps on which they came to feature. This article seeks to trace the genealogy of this representational flux through analysis of the images of Aboriginality that featured on postage stamps, as well as exploring the unique interaction of government and popular influence on the postage stamp as form. It uncovers a previously unknown image of the historically significant Aboriginal Australian man Gwoja Tjungurrayi, whose likeness features on the Australian two dollar coin.

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this paper includes the names and images of people who have died.*



**Figure 1: The 1950 'Aborigine' 8½d postage stamp featuring Gwoja Tjungurrayi. Designer and engraver: Frank Manley.**

Source: Courtesy of Australia Post.

Every modern Australian has encountered Gwoja Tjungurrayi's image. The nameless Aboriginal man engraved on our two dollar coin was based on a drawing of the Warlpiri-Anmatyerr man.<sup>1</sup> Tjungurrayi was catapulted to an unlikely fame when he became the first living Australian, settler or Aboriginal, to be featured on a postage stamp. From 1950 to 1966, 99 million stamps featuring Tjungurrayi's portrait were sold, and he became known to Australia and the world as 'One Pound Jimmy'.<sup>2</sup> Despite being one of the most sighted people in Australian history, there is little popular knowledge of his life. The only text on the stamp featuring Tjungurrayi's image, his sole identifier, is the word 'Aborigine'. Tjungurrayi provoked settler fascination and became an internationally recognised national symbol, all while remaining almost entirely invisible.

The use of Aboriginal motifs as iconography on government-issued stamps prior to the use of Tjungurrayi's image in 1950 was rare. Only four stamps that feature Aboriginal themes were released between 1934 and 1950, the first of their kind. The timing of the emergence of Aboriginal themes in Australian cultural nationalism in the interwar and immediate postwar period is curious, and represents a revival of settler Australian interest in Aboriginal Australians. Between Federation in 1901 and the 1930s, Aboriginal people were conspicuously absent in the search for a distinctly Australian national visual iconography. This sudden emergence raises some important questions, namely why representations of Aboriginal people and motifs became so popular in mid-century Australia, and how Tjungurrayi's image in particular came to resonate in settler Australia. As visual evidence, stamps provide a concentrated snapshot of the tense and unstable positioning of Aboriginal people within both the settler imagination and the Australian nation during this period.

As understandings of the place of Aboriginal people within Australia shifted over the twentieth century, a proliferation of visual representations emerged that drew upon earlier colonial visual language, and hence images of Aboriginal Australians formed their own moving historical trajectory, as mobile as the postage stamps on which they came to feature. In this paper, I trace the genealogy of this representational flux through analysis of the images of Aboriginality that featured on postage stamps, as well as exploring the unique interaction of government and popular influence on the postage stamp as form.

1 'Two Dollars', Royal Australian Mint, accessed 16 November 2020, [www.ramint.gov.au/two-dollars](http://www.ramint.gov.au/two-dollars).

2 Some sources attribute the moniker 'one pound Jimmy' to the price Tjungurrayi sold boomerangs he made, others to his postage stamp fame, and some to the price he asked in exchange for sharing of cultural knowledge. Taking into account particular events in his life history, and given the exchange rates for the good mentioned, Jillian Barnes makes a compelling case that the nickname likely referred to very high price Tjungurrayi set for the sharing of his cultural knowledge after several of his countrymen were violently coerced into revealing cultural secrets. See: Barnes, 'Resisting the Captured Image', 114–15.

This article draws on an extensive recent scholarship concerning representations of Aboriginal Australians within colonial discourse,<sup>3</sup> as well as scholarship that uses mobility as an analytic frame. Stamps are, after all, mobile objects by design, and this article seeks to politically and culturally historicise these transitory sources and their complex social lives.<sup>4</sup> Postage stamps act as ‘tiny transmitters’ of nationalist and colonial ideology due both to their capacity for movement and to act as sites of official, state-sanctioned visual propaganda.<sup>5</sup> The fact that stamps are mobile transmitters results from their most basic function, as all postage stamps are destined for viewing by a large international audience. The result is that stamps have perhaps ‘more concentrated ideological density per square centimetre than any other cultural form’, as they move through the world as miniature nation-building propaganda.<sup>6</sup> And yet, despite their ties to government officialdom, stamps are also ubiquitous, cheap, accessible by everyone and a favoured item for collection. Their collectability appeals to popular audiences, which in turn drives their design and production as governments have sought to capitalise on people’s desire to collect by releasing special editions, and stamps featuring a wider variety of subject matter. Australia Post began issuing commemorative stamps in 1927, a change from their earlier practice of issuing stamps only for postal requirements. This shift marked the beginning of a new era in Australian Government stamp production, as commemorative stamps were issued regularly to generate public interest and satisfy the desires of philatelists. This required a greater selection of imagery, preferably exciting or interesting, to replace the long-serving pre-1927 kangaroo with map of Australia (Figure 2), and King George VI stamps.

3 Many scholars have attended to visual representations of Aboriginal Australians in popular, mass-produced and colonial culture, including Lynette Russell’s exploration of images of ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ Aboriginality in *Walkabout*, and Liz Conor’s exploration of stereotypic visual leitmotifs of Aboriginal women in popular print media and material culture (Russell, ‘Going *Walkabout* in the 1950’s’, 4–8; Conor, *Skin Deep*). Adrian Franklin has considered the emergence of kitsch Aboriginalia in the Australian tourist market as a kind of national branding amid seemingly contradictory assimilationist policy (Franklin, ‘Aboriginalia’, 195–208), while Jillian Barnes has similarly explored the history of visual representations of Aboriginal Australia in central Australian tourist promotion and materials (Barnes, ‘Resisting the Captured Image’; Barnes, ‘Tourism and Place-Making at Uluru’, 77–104). Jane Lydon has repeatedly demonstrated the power of photographic representations of Aboriginal people as visual evidence in historical debates concerning Australian colonial history (Lydon, *Photography, Humanitarianism, Empire*; Lydon, “Behold the Tears”, 234–50; Lydon, *Eye Contact*). Penny Edmonds has highlighted the ways in which early colonial imagery of Aboriginal peoples in Australia were formed within interconnected global and imperial histories (Edmonds, “Failing in Every Endeavour to Conciliate”; Edmonds, ‘The Proclamation Cup’). The construction of the ‘native’ in the form of flora, fauna or persons, as a visual articulation of settler Australianness, identity and (un)belonging has also taken root as subject matter particularly favoured by Australian postcolonial artists (see, for example, Cozzolino and Rutherford, *Symbols of Australia*; Langton and David, ‘William Ricketts Sanctuary’; Taylor, ‘Settler Children, Kangaroos and the Cultural Politics of Australian National Belonging’). For representation of this topic in visual art, see Cininas, ‘Antipodean Bestiary’, 21–39; Gardner, ‘Brook Andrew’, 668–75.

4 Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*. On the mutual constitution of materiality and sociability in relation to stamps and their social lives, see Frewer, ‘Japanese Postage Stamps as Social Agents’, 1–19.

5 Igor Cusack coined the phrase ‘tiny transmitter’ to denote the nationalist ideological dissemination the form made possible. Cusack, ‘Tiny Transmitters of Nationalist and Colonial Ideology’, 591.

6 Scott, *European Stamp Design*, 13.



**Figure 2: The 1913 kangaroo and map 1d postage stamp. Designer unknown; engraver: Samuel Reading.**

Source: Courtesy of Australia Post.

Stamps are required to appeal to popular audiences, which complicates their role as bearers of official, national imagery. Stamps, Pauliina Raento argues, offer 'the national elite of a state a direct, mundane contact with its citizens', yet stamps also absorb popular cultural forms and tropes to meet their commercial function.<sup>7</sup> This, I argue, makes stamps simultaneous products of both popular culture and governmentality, hence the imagery selected for this tiniest public exhibition space represents their unique interaction.

Douglas Frewer has suggested that postage stamps can be viewed as social agents, drawing on the many studies of material culture that consider objects as being imbued with an agency and social power that provokes reaction and response by individuals or societies, which in turn incite actions and events.<sup>8</sup> Materiality and sociability are mutually constituted and reinforcing, according to this line of thinking. Postage stamps can be considered social actors, as their creators intend to provoke particular responses and ideas in those who use and view them. The creator and the viewer are therefore actors who exist in a communicative social network constituted by the object. In the case of stamps, the creator is the state, and stamps as social agent become a site of interaction between popular audiences, popular culture and governmentality.

This interaction gave Australian stamps a unique role in the cultural dissemination of Australian nationalist imaginings of Aboriginality in the twentieth century. To trace the history of Australian stamps is to trace the history of Australian nationalist iconography, considering its international projections. Yet this history also includes a popular audience who received and shaped government messaging within a communicative network, facilitated by the postage stamp as social actor. Considering representations of Aboriginality within the visual lexicon of this interactive space allows for an examination of change and continuity in settler Australian attitudes towards, and conceptions of, Aboriginal Australians and their place in the nation.

As Chris Healy has observed, settler acknowledgement of Indigenous presence in Australian history has been defined by complex processes of recognition, repudiation and forgetting.<sup>9</sup> The emergence of a symbolic, visual Aboriginal presence in the mid-twentieth century can easily be read within such a framework. Indeed, the two stamps released in the 1930s appear to reflect settler imaginings of a lost primordial past and 'authentic' Aboriginality, the classic trope of a 'vanishing race' overrun and replaced by settler modernity. Yet at the same time the selection of Tjungurrayi's image for use on a stamp in 1950 also reflects more complex and shifting racial and cultural understandings of Aboriginality in the interwar and postwar periods. While there was

7 Raento, 'Communicating Geopolitics through Postage Stamps', 602.

8 Frewer, 'Japanese Postage Stamps', 1–4.

9 Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines*.

no singular Australian approach to understanding or imagining Aboriginal society at this time, earlier emphasis on typologies drawn from racial science that informed theories of biological absorption and gave rise to assimilationist policies began to intermix with cultural and environmental understandings of difference influenced by anthropology.<sup>10</sup> There was a growing realisation that Aboriginal people were likely to continue to survive into the future as a distinctive minority population, albeit to some extent socially and culturally assimilated into the settler majority.<sup>11</sup> These shifts coincided with a renewed interest in Aboriginal culture in the interwar period, in part influenced by anthropological expeditions in northern Australia by Ted Strehlow, Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, and Ronald and Catherine Berndt. Art and literary movements that sought to forge a distinctively Australian creative culture turned to these anthropological accounts and the Aboriginal peoples of central and northern Australia for inspiration. Members of the Jindyworobak literary movement integrated Aboriginal subjects and mythologies in their writing for example, while modernist painter Margaret Preston appropriated visual motifs common to Aboriginal art. Crass bric-a-brac depicting Aboriginal people filled suburban living rooms.

Though this article intends to analyse representations of Tjungurrayi and Aboriginality more broadly, I will conclude by considering Tjungurrayi the man: a father, husband, stockman, lawmaker. The history of Tjungurrayi's own family includes an intergenerational engagement with the ubiquitous postage stamp.<sup>12</sup> Tjungurrayi was a key historical figure who negotiated multiple identities and complex interactions with settler society throughout his life, and his story should be as recognised as his image.

## Stamps as Aboriginalia

Accounting for the genealogy of the use of Tjungurrayi's image is less than straightforward considering the multiple forms of media through which it has been disseminated. Over the span of a century his portrait has made appearances on the front cover of *Walkabout* magazine in 1936 and 1950, was used on stamps in 1938 and from 1950 to 1966, has been printed on ashtrays and decorative plates, and is still featured on Australian currency.<sup>13</sup> It is impossible to read one single, stable meaning into an image of such diverse origins and receptions, so instead I identify three formative historical strands that contextualise why Tjungurrayi's image took on such representative power. They are Australian nationalism and government

10 McGregor, 'Governance, Not Genocide', 290–311; Rowse, *Indigenous and Other Australians since 1901*, 169–70.

11 McGregor, 'Governance, Not Genocide'.

12 Donald M. Reid has argued that it is the ubiquity of stamps that also makes them invisible, see Reid, 'The Symbolism of Postage Stamps', 223.

13 Russell notes use of Tjungurrayi's image on ashtray and decorative plates in 'Going *Walkabout*', 5.

assimilation policy; the intensely racialised, kitsch Australian featured on bric-a-brac and homewares that drew on Aboriginal motifs, popular from the 1940s to 1970s, referred to as 'Aboriginalia'; and a legacy of colonial-era visual representations of central Australian Aboriginal men.<sup>14</sup> The two latter histories were deeply entangled with the tourist industry, which I will consider first before turning to mid-century government assimilation policy and civic nation-building.

There were only three instances of Aboriginal motifs being used in Australian postage stamps prior to the use of Tjunggurrayi's image in 1950. That Aboriginal imagery came to feature on stamps as official, nationally and internationally projected government imagery during the interwar and postwar period, after an exceptionally long absence, is curious and worthy of explanation. That this occurred during a period in which Australian Government Aboriginal policy was one broadly described as 'assimilation' is a seemingly puzzling contradiction.<sup>15</sup>

The first stamp to feature an Aboriginal person was not produced until 1934, to mark the centenary of Victoria, and Marcia Langton describes it as picturing a 'landscape of the imperial saga of civilisation conquering savagery'.<sup>16</sup> That Aboriginal imagery was absent from stamps for such a long time relates only partly to the commercial practices of Australia Post. Earlier forms of official, national iconography sought to naturalise and emphasise colonial settler ties to the land, relying most often on depictions of distinctive native flora and fauna.<sup>17</sup> The first national stamp released after Federation, in 1913, shown in Figure 2, is a fine example of this appropriation. Aboriginal people, who were necessarily displaced in order for the settler colony to expand, were conspicuously absent and intentionally forgotten in the search for a distinctly Australian national visual iconography.

14 Though this article considers the origins of Aboriginalia within the settler colonial imagination, framing these items as depictions of intensely racialised stereotypes, it is important to note that contemporary Aboriginal people's perceptions of and interactions with this material culture can be more complex. Visual artist Tony Albert has noted that he felt an intense emotional connectedness with Aboriginalia as a young person and became an avid collector of these items. Albert describes wanting to be surrounded by Aboriginalia, which felt 'like looking at pictures of family. The joy and amazement that we could have our images placed upon these day to day objects'. He goes on to describe a shift in his relationship with the objects, moving to 'politically understanding the connotations behind them, the ways in which aboriginal people are labelled and re-labelled, are anthropologically gazed upon. The sinister nature and undertones attached to them'. Albert states that his use of Aboriginalia in his art practice is a way of 're-voicing' the objects, to use them in a way contrary to their original connotations. See Tony Albert, 'Why Does Tony Albert Collect Aboriginalia?', YouTube, 31 May 2018, *QAGOMA*, accessed 31 August 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPbd808PUiU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPbd808PUiU).

15 Adrian Franklin, Maggie Walter and Aileen Moreton-Robinson have explored this seeming contradiction in reference to a broader range of visual materials depicting Aboriginal people, described as 'Aboriginalia', during the assimilation era: Franklin, Walter and Moreton-Robinson, 'Repositories of Recognition?', 11. For the history of the policy of assimilation in Australia see, for example, Armitage, *Comparing the Policy of Aboriginal Assimilation*.

16 Langton, 'Stamped!', 26.

17 Taylor, 'Settler Children, Kangaroos and the Cultural Politics of Australian National Belonging', 169–82.



**Figure 3: The 1934 'Centenary of Victoria' 2d postage stamp, 2 June 1934. The original work is held in the National Philatelic Collection.**

Source: Courtesy National Australian Archives (NAA A1200, L20314).

That the Victorian centenary stamp emerged when it did is particularly significant in light of the silence that preceded it. In this image (Figure 3), the Yarra River acts as a symbolic, contrasting divider between an ancient and forgotten past, and the progress and success of the settler present (and imagined future). The Kulin nations man pictured becomes a symbol of the settler transformation of a primordial 'wasteland' into a productive, modern nation – a spectre of dispossession. He leans forward as if to take a step but freezes in an anticipatory moment of surprised contemplation as he considers the new world on the bank opposite, which did not, in this era of eugenic theory and biological absorption, reserve a place for him.

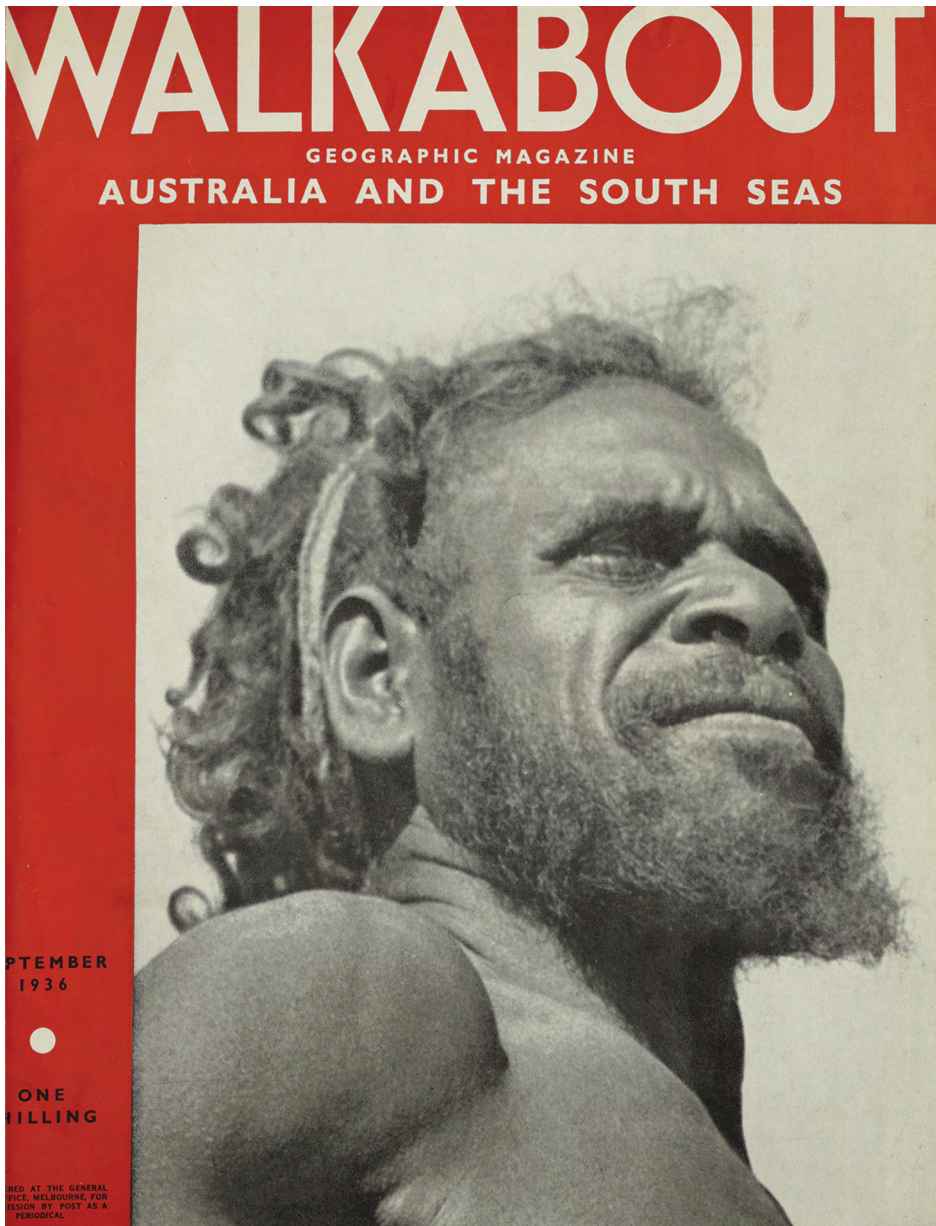


**Figure 4: (left) The 1938 Centenary of Geelong collectable poster stamp of no postal validity produced by the City of Geelong. Designer unknown. The stamp features a print clearly based on the *Walkabout* photograph of Tjungurrayi; (right) The photograph of Tjungurrayi taken by Roy Dunstan that featured in *Walkabout* 2, no. 3 (1 January 1936): 14.**

Source: (left) Image courtesy of private collection; (right) Courtesy of National Library of Australia (Rex Nan Kivell Collection, JAF NEWSPAPER 919.4 WAL).

A second, very similar stamp (Figure 4, left) was produced four years later in 1938. Released to mark the centenary of the Victorian town Geelong in 1938, it is an incredibly rare collectable stamp. It has no decimal mark as it was not issued by the Post-Master General's Department and hence could not be used to send mail. It was produced by the city of Geelong purely as a collector's item. Remarkably, the Aboriginal man featured on the stamp is Tjungurrayi. The stamp print is clearly based on a Roy Dunstan photograph of Tjungurrayi that first appeared in *Walkabout* two years previously (Figure 4, right), in 1936. Tjungurrayi had encountered Charles Holmes, editor of the Australian National Travel Association magazine *Walkabout*, somewhere east of Alice Springs in the early 1930s and accepted Holmes's request for Dunstan, *Walkabout's* official photographer, to capture his image. At the time the photograph was taken, it would not have been apparent that the resulting image would circulate not only nationally but also internationally, being repurposed across several different mediums. This chance encounter was to have a lasting impact on Tjungurrayi's life, transforming him into a public figure and forging a visual legacy that has extended beyond his lifetime. Due to its rarity, the existence of this stamp has not been accounted for in the only other brief historical account of Aboriginal representation on Australian stamps.<sup>18</sup> Nor is it noted in other scholarly work that considers representations of Tjungurrayi in the context of tourist promotion.<sup>19</sup> This is significant as the 1950 stamp featuring Tjungurrayi's portrait is not the first stamp to feature a living Australian as has been claimed. It is, incredibly, not even the first stamp to feature Tjungurrayi.

18 Langton, 'Stamped!'.  
 19 Barnes, 'Resisting the Captured Image'; Rolls and Johnston, *Travelling Home*.



**Figure 5: Tjungurrayi on the cover of *Walkabout* 2, no. 11 (1 September 1936).**

Source: Courtesy of National Library of Australia (Rex Nan Kivell Collection, JAF NEWSPAPER 919.4 WAL).

The Geelong centenary stamp may have been based on the Victorian centenary stamp, or at least have drawn inspiration from it, while also incorporating the recent photographs of Tjungurrayi printed in *Walkabout*. Both stamp prints represent an apparently 'authentic' Aboriginal presence in Australia as relegated to distant and ancient time, and in doing so suggest the contemporary presence of Aboriginal

people as anachronistic. Aboriginal men are imaged in these prints to act as a symbolic, visual contrast to settler development and progress, underscored by the European buildings pictured. Settler conceptions of Australia as a land taken from primordial 'savagery' to modernity explain why an image of Tjungurrayi, a central Australian man, has been superimposed over a Victorian town that he never visited, thousands of kilometres from his home. These types of representations of central Australian men were inspired by a genre of classically depicted 'noble savage' types from the frontier period, which also contrasted Aboriginality with modernity.<sup>20</sup>

Dunstan's photograph of Tjungurrayi on the cover of *Walkabout* (Figure 5) and the two Victorian centenary stamps come at the tail end of several decades of pioneer-inspired depictions of central Australian Aboriginal people. This visual language drew heavily on prior, late nineteenth-century exploration narratives that cast white explorers of the interior as the venerated heroes of empire battling the 'dead centre' wasteland of the nation in order to incorporate it into an accelerating settler colonial expansion in the years following Federation.<sup>21</sup> Aboriginal men in these colonial narratives were presented as dangerous, anonymised aggressors who clashed with white explorers and pastoralists who were then 'forced' to defend themselves.<sup>22</sup> In her account of the making of Uluru as a tourist site, Barnes argues that *Walkabout* drew on these established narrative and illustrative tropes when photographing Aboriginal people in central Australia in the 1930s. The men selected by Roy Dunstan were framed by captions that labelled them as heavily armed and sly aggressors, suspended in time and indistinguishable from the men who had decades earlier violently clashed with explorers of the interior.<sup>23</sup>

The twentieth-century tourist industry drew heavily on the racialised imagery of this earlier colonial lexicon, and central Australia, in particular, featured so prominently as it was considered a 'primordial' site of perceived Aboriginal 'authenticity'. As Lynette Russell argues, Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia, often localised in urban centres, were thought to have been subsumed into the white population and therefore were not considered to be 'real' Aborigines. The representational density of Aboriginal 'authenticity' via its connotations to a deep, static past explains the concentration of depictions of central Australians in Victorian stamps communicating modernity and development in the 1930s. The Red Centre became a fixture of the Melburnian imagination during this period, a hinterland comparative to urban modernity that offered a seemingly authentic route to settler 'naturalisation' as Australians.<sup>24</sup>

20 Barnes, 'Resisting the Captured Image', 93.

21 Federation acted as a point of mobilisation for geographic expansion, drawing previously 'unsettled' territories into the nationalist project. 'Uninhabited' regions (i.e. those with majority Aboriginal populations and minority white populations) became important sites in a politically motivated quest for spatial control that was encoded with the Federation vision of a white Australian future.

22 Barnes, 'Resisting the Captured Image', 86.

23 Barnes, 'Resisting the Captured Image'; Barnes, 'Tourism and Place-Making at Uluru'.

24 Sutton, 'Melbourne's Outback', 74–77.

Debate continues over the possible meanings that can be read into Dunstan's photograph of Tjungurrayi in the context of other representations of Aboriginality in the widely disseminated middlebrow magazine *Walkabout*.<sup>25</sup> It seems certain that Tjungurrayi's image was selected for both the 1938 and 1950 stamps in order to capitalise on the popularity already generated from *Walkabout*. The selection of his portrait for display across multiple forms of media coincided with an increase in the popularity of Aboriginal design in both tourist and Australian markets that saw an explosion of 'Aboriginalia' souvenirs and bric-a-brac. The rising popularity of these kitsch forms was perhaps informed by the Australian art and literary movements of the 1920s and 1930s, which appropriated Aboriginal subject matter, and the interest in Aboriginal peoples generated by *Walkabout*.<sup>26</sup> Liz Conor describes Aboriginalia as drawing on Aboriginal motifs and emblems and depicting racialised stereotypes including 'Aboriginal children as "picanninies", women as "Lubras", men as "Myalls" and elders as "noble savages"'.<sup>27</sup> Tjungurrayi's image in *Walkabout* and on the 1938 and 1950 stamps in many ways belong to this archive of Australian kitsch, which appropriated Aboriginal culture and imagery in modernised re-imaginings of the noble savage trope.<sup>28</sup> Reading Tjungurrayi's portraits within this archive allows for the enduring popularity of his image to be located within settler society's romanticisation of the timeless stasis of 'authentic' and 'traditional' Aboriginal society, thought to be fast disappearing.

A third stamp (Figure 6), released in 1948, was the first to feature 'Aboriginal art', and is similarly connected to the mid-century rise of settler appropriation of Aboriginal designs and the proliferation of Aboriginalia. The timing of its release coincides with the established interest in Aboriginal art by Australian modernist artists. Margaret Preston is one of the best known figures of this mid-century arts and craft movement, but many other artists and designers incorporated Aboriginal design in their art practice, including Tasmanian potter Violet Mace, who travelled to central Australia to obtain Aboriginal designs for her pottery.<sup>29</sup> Telling of the growing influence of 'settler primitivism' on Australian mid-century art and design, the print featured on the 1948 stamp was not the work of an Aboriginal artist.<sup>30</sup> The image was a stylistic imitation of rock art by an Estonian immigrant, Gert Sellheim; the winning image in a nationwide stamp design competition in 1946.<sup>31</sup>

25 See Barnes, 'Resisting the Captured Image'; Rolls and Johnston, *Travelling Home*, 126–30.

26 Franklin, 'Aboriginalia', 201–2.

27 Liz Conor, 'Friday Essay: The Politics of Aboriginal Kitsch', *The Conversation*, 3 March 2017, accessed 27 July 2019, [theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-politics-of-aboriginal-kitsch-73683](http://theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-politics-of-aboriginal-kitsch-73683).

28 Lynette Russell has explored the links between the noble savage trope and Aboriginalia in 'Going *Walkabout*', 4–8.

29 Preston, 'The Application of Aboriginal Design', 44–58; Edmonds, 'The Proclamation Cup'.

30 Thomas, *Possessions*.

31 It was not until 1971 that a stamp featured artwork produced by an Aboriginal artist, though the artist was not the focus of the stamp and was anonymised. I have been unable to find the name of the commissioned artist.



**Figure 6: The 1948 'Aboriginal Art' 2s postage stamp. Designer: Gert Sellheim; Engraver: George Lissende.**

Source: Courtesy of Australia Post.

Sellheim was not alone in his appropriation, and interestingly many of those who contributed to the spread and popularity of appropriated Aboriginal symbols and motifs in design were also new immigrants. Langton and David have argued that with the arrival of postwar European immigrants came more discussion of the need for immigrants to assimilate into the 'Australian way of life', which though always poorly defined, inspired the creation of an Australian image for overseas export to

encourage tourism and immigration.<sup>32</sup> The Australian National Travel Association, creator of *Walkabout*, engaged in image- and placemaking that highlighted climate, ancient Aboriginal heritage, nature, wilderness and unique flora and fauna as distinctly Australian attractions.<sup>33</sup> As has been noted, 'Aboriginalia' souvenirs and images played a central role in this new tourist marketing, re-imagining colonial-era tropes for modern audiences. The influx of immigrants also marked a shift in the direction of Australian nation-building, as civically defined nationalism replaced the earlier Federation-era ethnonationalism exemplified by the White Australia policy that would previously have excluded many of the postwar arrivals.

The tropes of Aboriginalia are, indisputably, a defining element in the social lives of the stamps featuring Tjungurrayi. The Aboriginalia that became representative of settler Australia's incorporation of the Red Centre into the national imaginary influenced the way general audiences viewed and understood the images of Tjungurrayi on stamps. Both the 1938 and 1950 stamps featuring Tjungurrayi belong to this visual history and its generative ideology, and it was not, as Langton notes, until the early 1980s that stamps began to reflect the 'social changes that rapid reform by governments of the administration of Indigenous affairs throughout the 1970s'.<sup>34</sup> Yet in the postwar era, at the time the 1950 stamp of Tjungurrayi was released, the first stirrings of a civically rather than ethnically defined national future were emerging, which would inform 1970s reform and policy shift to self-determination.

The nationalisation of Indigenous imagery and symbols is itself, as Langton argues, a symbol of a postcolonial state, which provides additional explanation for the rise of 'Aboriginalia' and the popularity of Tjungurrayi's image mid-century.<sup>35</sup> The colonising settler nation-state comes to know and own the Indigenous as they gain dominion of the land, and hence reproduces its forms as a part of its nationalist imagery, asserting ownership. While central Australians like Tjungurrayi were cast as representative of stone age stasis, bringing the Red Centre into the Australian national imagination was an act of placemaking that determined to make an appropriated land feel like home to an alien settler population.<sup>36</sup> Central Australia was imaginatively incorporated into 'modern' Australia and its future, and central Australians came to form a part of a new visual landscape.

32 Langton and David, 'William Ricketts Sanctuary', 160.

33 Barnes, 'Tourism and Place-Making at Uluru'.

34 Langton, 'Stamped!', 28.

35 Langton and David, 'William Ricketts Sanctuary', 161.

36 Barnes, 'Tourism and Place-Making at Uluru'.

## Picturing assimilation and civic nationhood

That Aboriginalia emerged during the assimilation period could be read as evidence of the cultural formation of a 'repository of recognition' at a time when the Australian Government had formulated a native affairs policy that intended to physiologically and culturally absorb the Aboriginal population into the white settler majority.<sup>37</sup> The conscious projection and promotion of Aboriginal motifs to national and international audiences at this time appears at odds with assimilatory policy. Given the influence of the Aboriginalia genre on stamp representations, it is tempting to consider the presence of Aboriginality on mid-century stamps as an outlet for an ambiguous settler nostalgia evoked by the presumed assimilation and hence disappearance of Aboriginal people. As Conor describes, 'The figures found in Aboriginalia evoke a troubling presence, in which visual appeal, sometimes libidinal, stands in for the profound ambivalence at the heart of settler-colonialism, which has benefited from the violent dispossession of a people.'<sup>38</sup>

Though government Indigenous policy in the interwar and postwar periods has frequently been compartmentalised and referred to jointly as the 'assimilation era', Russell McGregor has argued that the interwar policy of assimilation through biological absorption was distinct from postwar sociocultural assimilation.<sup>39</sup> This change in policy direction is crucial to account for, as while the policy of biological absorption assumed and engineered the 'inevitable' demise of Aboriginal people, sociocultural assimilation did not. It instead assumed, for the first time, that Aboriginal people would continue to survive, and be incorporated into the Australian nation-state, though as culturally and socially assimilated with the white settler majority.<sup>40</sup> Yet it is also true that there was no unified, singular understanding of the presumed trajectory of Aboriginal society, nor a neat and easily identifiable intellectual shift from biological to sociocultural assimilation in the formation and implementation of Aboriginal policy in northern Australia. As Tim Rowse notes, notions of the 'decline, development, absorption, disappearance, detribalisation' of Aboriginal peoples and societies existed simultaneously, intersecting and cross-fertilising.<sup>41</sup>

37 Adrian Franklin makes this argument in his consideration of the emergence of 'Aboriginalia' tourist wares during the assimilation period from the 1940s to the 1970s, see Franklin, 'Aboriginalia'.

38 Conor, 'Friday Essay: The Politics of Aboriginal Kitsch'.

39 McGregor, 'Governance, Not Genocide', 292.

40 McGregor describes this 'new objective of national incorporation' as a definitive turning point in government policy, though notes that biological absorption intended a form national incorporation also, though by vastly different method, 'Governance, Not Genocide', 296–97.

41 Rowse, *Indigenous and Other Australians*, 169.

This distinction is important in the context of understanding the use of Tjungurrayi's image on the 1950 stamp; however, it is not because policies of biological assimilation or sociocultural assimilation represent clear intellectual trends, or necessarily resulted in a marked change in the lived experiences of Indigenous people, who still faced ongoing dispossession, racial discrimination and policies that allowed paternalistic government intervention into their lives. Nor is it because this change in government policy had an immediate effect on popular understandings of assimilation in the public imagination. Ordinary people were likely unaware that the postwar assimilation policy was distinct from earlier policies of biological absorption. This is evidenced quite clearly via the hundreds of letters sent to Tjungurrayi by members of the public, from Australia and abroad, who had viewed his image on the stamp and were keen to acquire a copy of his thumbprint as a memento of 'a vanishing race'.<sup>42</sup> Their desires expressed a bizarre and ad hoc intellectual mixture of Victorian-era evolutionary Tylorism and extinction theory that had popularised the idea that the 'extinction' of Aboriginal tribes was the expected imminent result of contact with 'superior' European cultures.

Tjungurrayi left no first-hand account of his experience of his unexpected fame, but from the limited media accounts available he appears to have resented the attention the stamp drew to him, at least at first. In 1953, three years after the stamp was released, Tjungurrayi was working as a station hand at Central Mount Wedge, 260 kilometres west of Alice Springs. His postage stamp fame had increased his recognisability considerably, and it is at this time that he is reported to have shaved off his beard in an attempt to conceal his identity.<sup>43</sup> Tjungurrayi initially resisted requests for his thumbprint by avoiding the local Native Affairs patrol officer Les Penhall who, in March 1953, was trying to attain it for collectors.<sup>44</sup> A copy was eventually obtained for an American stamp collector, though it is unclear what caused Tjungurrayi to change his mind and provide his print. Coercion may have been used, though Tjungurrayi had throughout his life proved a skilled negotiator and communicator, acting as an interlocutor in cross-cultural interactions with anthropologists. This suggests that far from being outside of his element in negotiating such exchanges with white men, he was perhaps within it. Though several accounts from July 1953 describe Tjungurrayi as shy in relation to his fame, his employer is reported at this time to have purchased an ink pad, and more than one copy of Tjungurrayi's thumbprint entered circulation.<sup>45</sup> Tjungurrayi's initial reluctance may have reflected his relationship with the particular patrol officer

42 'Although He Doesn't Know It, One Pound Jimmy Is Immortal', *Age* (Melbourne), 22 March 1952, 2; 'Autograph Hunters Will Miss Jimmy', *Age* (Melbourne), 14 July 1953, 4; 'One-Pound Jimmy Shaved', *Centralian Advocate* (Alice Springs), 17 July 1953, 4.

43 See 'One-Pound Jimmy Shaved', *Centralian Advocate*.

44 See reference to Tjungurrayi 'going bush' to avoid a Native Affairs Patrol Officer attempting to take his fingerprint, reported in 'One Pound Jimmy's Autograph', *Centralian Advocate* (Alice Springs), 21 March 1952, 6.

45 'Autograph Hunters Will Miss Jimmy', *Age*.

attempting to approach him, or he may have discerned the possibility to negotiate a more worthwhile exchange with those who wished to take copies of his print, and come to an arrangement with his employer.

Despite the complexities of Tjungurrayi's and other Aboriginal people's lived experiences, this change in assimilation policy is crucial to account for as it is connected to a particular understanding of national citizenship and nation-building. Given stamps' functions as visual communicators of national ideology, understanding how 'nation' was defined is crucial to their semiotic decoding. The postwar era marks a global shift in direction of the ideologies of nationalism, and these changed conceptions were reflected in the national iconography featured on stamps across several settler colonies in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>46</sup>

Maloney conducted a transnational analysis of the stamps of the settler colonies of Australia, Canada and New Zealand, arguing that the nationalist imagery featured on stamps developed in similar phases throughout the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> Across each country, the imagery used on stamps follows a similar trajectory, moving from nationalist identity based on imperial ties to Britain and economic contribution to empire, to the ethnonationalism of the early twentieth century (defined in Australia by the White Australia policy)<sup>48</sup> to what Maloney describes as the more unifying civic imagery drawn upon post-1950. The inclusion of Aboriginal people (and white women) in stamp imagery in the mid- to late twentieth century can be taken to reflect the development of an increasingly civic minded and liberal culture, concerned with multicultural representation.

On the postwar global stage, Australia would not have been inclined to advertise Australian nation-building as based in an ethnonationalism achieved through assimilatory policy or eugenics theory.<sup>49</sup> Civic nationhood became the new nationalist framework for western democracies, and the postwar policy of sociocultural assimilation was, according to McGregor, exemplary of a civic nationhood, 'whereby national cohesion would be attained through shared rights and responsibilities, a common public culture, substantial consistency in values and aspirations, and the veneration of national symbols such as flag and anthem'.<sup>50</sup> Cultural conformity to the dominant ethnic group, white settler Australians, was demanded, and it was

46 Maloney, "One of the Best Advertising Mediums the Country Can Have", 21–23.

47 Maloney, "One of the Best Advertising Mediums the Country Can Have", 22–25.

48 Darian-Smith, Grimshaw and Macintyre, *Britishness Abroad*.

49 Carey has examined the connections between eugenics theory and discourses of whiteness in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century, and indeed eugenics theory and biological absorption are often oppositional. Eugenists argued for segregation and sterilisation of those deemed unfit, and potential containments to the 'white race', though focused relatively little on the 'Aboriginal problem' and the 'solution' of biological absorption despite their underlying preoccupation with ensuring white supremacy, see for instance Carey, "Not Only a White Race", 162–65.

50 McGregor, 'Governance, Not Genocide', 297. Russell McGregor also makes the argument that the ethnonationalism that provided the framework for the Federation-era White Australia policy and interwar Aboriginal policy began to shift to civic nationalism in the 1950s–1960s in 'One People', 03.1–03.17.

into this culture that any minority ethnic 'others', Aboriginal or immigrant, were required to assimilate. There are of course elements of ethnonationalism within this civic nationalism, but it was cultural rather than biological assimilation demanded of Australian citizens from the 1950s to 1970s. This is how Tjungurrayi's portrait was able to become a kind of national symbol of civic, Australian nationhood.

Though the use of Tjungurrayi's image on the 1950 stamp is not entirely removed from the semiotic messaging of the 1930s stamps, this change in global context and Australian policy is significant and could account for some key changes in presentation during the interwar to postwar period. By 1950, for instance, Tjungurrayi is shown in head and shoulder profile (Figure 1), significant in that representations of central Australian Aboriginal men standing silently on one leg with spear in hand had become a ubiquitous stereotype, and, in the manner of stereotypes, homogenised individual Aboriginal men into a racial 'type' in visual representations.<sup>51</sup> In the context of these historic depictions of central Australian men as 'noble savages', the choice to present Tjungurrayi in portrait form is a notable visual shift. Though Tjungurrayi is not personally identified on the stamp, instead labelled as 'Aborigine' (as if broadly descriptive of a racial type), his identity was publicised very widely in the media.<sup>52</sup> His anglicised name 'Jimmy' was associated with his image, both photographic and print, and he was known as a real, living person, a first in regard to Aboriginal representation on stamps. This is a clear point of departure from the 1938 stamp (Figure 4) drawn from his photograph, where Tjungurrayi was so anonymised that he has not been associated with the image until now.

While a shifting political landscape saw new forms of nationalism conceptualised, accompanied by revised nationalist rhetoric and imagery, this move towards a seemingly progressive civic citizenship cannot be isolated from the history of settler impressions of Aboriginal Australians to which the miniscule, pocket-sized lithograph of Tjungurrayi's face also belonged. The Aboriginal imagery and people featured on stamps in the decades after the 1950–66 print run featuring Tjungurrayi fit more readily within a framework of civic nationalism, though Tjungurrayi's stamp portrait remains attached to the earlier visual lexicon of the colonial frontier and its modernised re-rendering as 'Aboriginalia' tourist tat in the middling years of the twentieth century.

51 Russell identifies this stereotype in 'Going Walkabout', 4.

52 Johnston and Rolls argue that some of the ways Tjungurrayi was presented in *Walkabout* were not necessarily racially othering, and were consistent with the way photographs of non-Aboriginal subjects or other subject matter were presented in the publication. See Rolls and Johnston, *Travelling Home*, 127–30.



**Figure 7: Six 1975 'Australian Women' 10c postage stamps from the 'Famous Women' series, the seventh issue in a series honouring famous Australians, released in 1975. The women pictured are Edith Cowan, Louisa Lawson, Ethel Richardson, Catherine Spence, Constance Stone and Truganini. Designers: Des and Jackie O'Brien.**

Source: Reproduced with permission of Australia Post; © Australian Postal Corporation.

Kitsch representations of Aboriginal people are not benign design elements, but, as Langton and David argue, have a 'corrosive effect on the public imagination in dealing with Aboriginal people' and hence prevent the incorporation of Australian Aboriginal people into civil society.<sup>53</sup> It is intriguing that a representation of Tjungurrayi on a stamp, chosen for its associations with the popular Aboriginalia genre, was used in an attempt to incorporate Aboriginal people into a national

<sup>53</sup> Langton and David, 'William Ricketts Sanctuary', 154.

civic imagery. Even later twentieth-century representations of Aboriginal people on stamps that display greater synchronicity with conceptions of civic nationalism, such as those that feature Truganini and Albert Namatjira, absorb Aboriginal people into nationalist imagery as if such an act was untroublesome, historically neutral, as if 'there were no troubling questions about their place in the nation'.<sup>54</sup> The choice of Truganini for the 1975 Australian 'famous women' series (Figure 7) is equally and especially notable in this regard, given that her popular fame was derived from the myth of her people's extinction.<sup>55</sup>

## Dignity, integrity, knowledge: The life of Gwoja Tjungurrayi

Tjungurrayi's own personal history reflects many 'troubling questions' about the place of Aboriginal people within the nation. Tjungurrayi was a survivor of the 1928 Coniston massacre, when up to 70 people, men, women and children, were brutally murdered. Tjungurrayi left no original, recorded testimony regarding the massacre, though it can be safely assumed it was a permanently life-altering experience defined by abject terror and despair. The Coniston massacre exemplifies the violent displacement of Aboriginal people that underpinned settler colonial expansion and the creation of the modern, 'civic' Australian nation-state.<sup>56</sup> Tjungurrayi survived such an event only to be chosen as a representative for a newly 'civic' Australia.

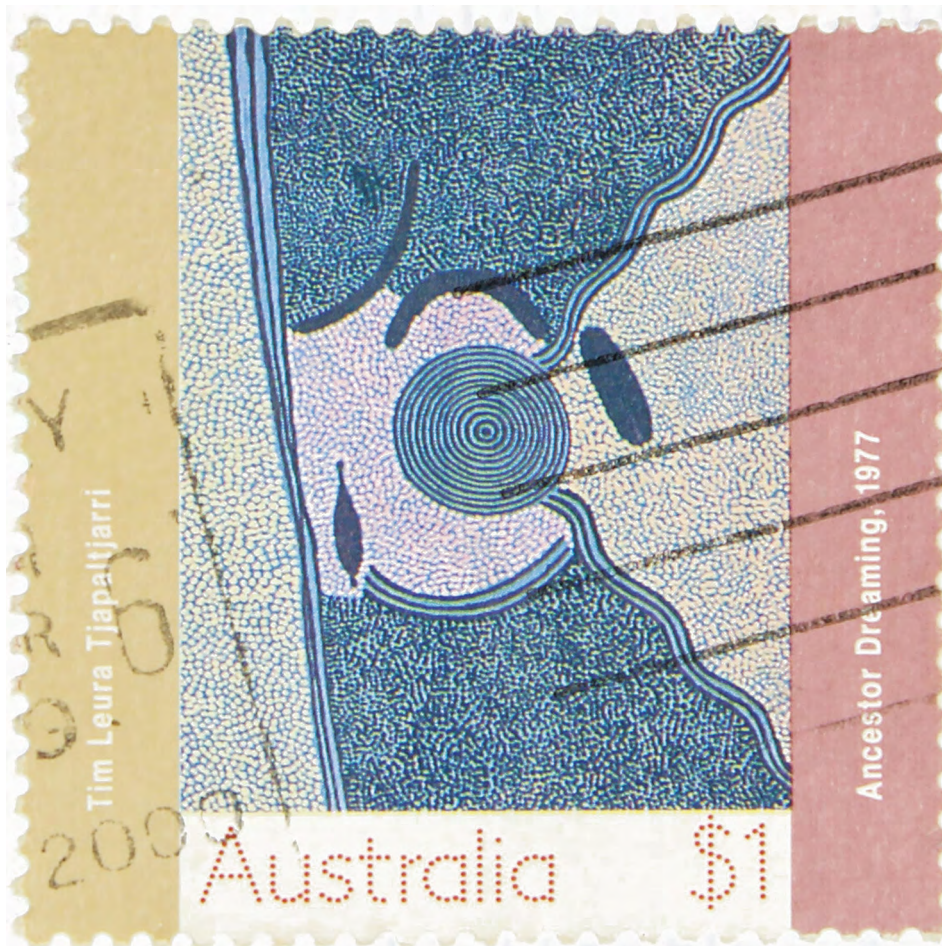
Born around 1895 in the Tanami Desert north-west of Alice Springs, Tjungurrayi was a stockman and station hand by trade, but he was also a traditional lawman, land custodian, cultural intermediary and guide, and family man. Tjungurrayi was married to Long Rose Nagnala in the late 1930s, with whom he had five adopted children, four sons and one daughter. Tjungurrayi took his responsibility as a father and law custodian very seriously, and was dedicated to ensuring traditional law and knowledge of country was passed down for future generations. It has been suggested that Tjungurrayi collaborated with so many anthropologists, including Ted Strehlow in the 1930s and Charles Mountford in the 1960s, as it allowed him greater opportunity to pass on knowledge to his sons and demonstrate that they could gain the respect of settler society by showcasing their own culture.<sup>57</sup>

54 Langton, 'Stamped', 26. A portrait of famed landscape artist Albert Namatjira was issued on a five-cent stamp in 1968.

55 For histories of the extinction myth in visual representations of the Tasmanians see, for example, Gleeson, 'Memories and Moonbirds'; Gough, 'Forgotten Lives'; Lehman, 'Tasmanian Gothic'.

56 For a historiographical review of frontier violence in Australia see, for example, Rogers and Bain, 'Genocide and Frontier Violence in Australia', 83–100.

57 Sadly, Tjungurrayi's daughter Joyce died of pneumonia at a young age, see Ainslie Roberts, 'Mailbag: One Pound Jimmy'.



**Figure 8: The 1988 'Art of the Desert' \$1 postage stamp featuring 'Ancestor Dreaming' by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, 1977. Designer: Janet Boschen, Australia Post Design Studio.**

Source: Reproduced with permission of Australia Post; © Australian Postal Corporation.

Tjungurrayi acted as an intermediary, translator and guide for Mountford, who described the men who shared their knowledge of the central desert, as 'possess[ing] great dignity', 'proven integrity' and 'profound philosophical knowledge'.<sup>58</sup> Mountford's collaborator, artist and photographer Ainslie Roberts also greatly admired and respected Tjungurrayi, creating the lithograph of Tjungurrayi that inspired the image on the Australian two dollar coin.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Mountford, *Australian Aboriginal Portraits*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> 'Two Dollars', Royal Australian Mint.

Tjungurrayi's demonstration of the value of Aboriginal culture appears to have had a profound effect on his sons, who went on to become leaders of the Western Desert art movement at Papunya.<sup>60</sup> One of his children, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, became one of the most well-known, regarded and collected Aboriginal artists in Australian history. Another of his sons, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, also became an accomplished artist. In 1988, 23 years after Tjungurrayi's death, one of Tim's paintings was featured on a postage stamp as a part of the 'Art of the Desert' series (Figure 8). Unlike his father's designation as 'Aborigine' in 1950, Tim is showcased as a significant artist, his name accompanying his painting on the face of the stamp.

## Conclusion: Officialising Aboriginalia

The postage stamp, as a mobile social actor, connected person to person on a global scale, representing and promoting the Australian nation through a visual language that signalled and constructed a settler vision of Aboriginality through the racialised tropes of Aboriginalia. Though Australian stamps featuring Aboriginal content were officially mandated by governments, they had roots in popular cultural forms, both visual and ideological. By the mid-twentieth century, during Tjungurrayi's lifetime, the kitsch Australiana of Aboriginalia had become an increasingly common and popular representation of Aboriginality. This not only informed the selection of Tjungurrayi's image for use on the 1950 stamp, but in part explains its enduring popularity in Australia and abroad.

Tjungurrayi's stamp portrait sits at the cusp of Australia's imagined future as a modernised, civic nation. It is reflective of a mid-century bridge between a 'white Australia' defined by settler repudiation of Aboriginal Australia, and the first stirrings of a post-1970s multicultural future. The Victorian centenary stamps, by contrast, reference a visible Aboriginality thought to be lost due to expanding modernity. What all of the stamp images have in common is a connection to a shared history of colonial visual language.

An opportunistic meeting between Tjungurrayi and a travelling photographer produced an image that ironically evoked the geospatial boundaries of the settler colonial state as governmental propaganda, while at the same time acting as a persistent reminder that Aboriginal people and history were an ongoing presence in modern Australia. In 2019, the Northern Territory electorate formerly named Stuart was renamed in honour of Tjungurrayi. The electorate, which spans from the Victoria River in the south to the Tanami Desert and Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park in the centre, now bears the name Gwoja.<sup>61</sup> Gwoja is the Anmatyerr word for

<sup>60</sup> Johnson, *Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, 43–57.

<sup>61</sup> 'Division of Gwoja', Northern Territory Electoral Commission, accessed 18 May 2021, [ntec.nt.gov.au/Electoral-divisions/Legislative-Assembly-division-profiles/2020-division-profiles/division-of-gwoja](https://ntec.nt.gov.au/Electoral-divisions/Legislative-Assembly-division-profiles/2020-division-profiles/division-of-gwoja).

water. That contemporary Australia is now beginning and able to remember and celebrate Tjungurrayi as an Elder, lawman and survivor is a legacy of his unlikely rise to fame on the face of a postage stamp.

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